

“THE SALT OF THE EARTH” IN COVENANTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Jesus' celebrated pronouncement that his disciples are “the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13) has become proverbial for persons considered to be fine, upstanding citizens, applauded for their contributions to the communities of which they are members. As is normally the case with biblical sayings that make their way into common parlance, this one, too, seems to be invoked without any real awareness of its original significance. In the instance of this particular logion, however, the irony is that the conventional (secular) wisdom is not so far from the truth. Interpreters have frequently understood salt as a metaphor for preservation, in the sense that Jesus' followers prevent society from degenerating into something worse than it already is. It is in contrast to this more or less negative function of salt that the ensuing essay argues for a more positive reading of the figure. That is to say, believers as “the salt of the earth,” rather than performing a chiefly preventive function, assume an activist role of making the world better than it was before, with, no less, eternal ramifications. How this can be is comprehensible in terms of the scriptural and traditional roles of salt as predicated by Jesus of his servants.

Like most biblical ideas nowadays, the notion of salt has come in for its share of study,¹ so that commentators may avail themselves of a variety of possibilities for explaining its presence in Matt 5:13 and associated texts. W. D. Davies and Dale Allison enumerate no less than eleven options, but

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¹ In lieu of an exhaustive assemblage of literature, the needs of most English-reading researchers will be met by the following: James E. Latham, *The Religious Symbolism of Salt* (ThH 64; Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1982); H. Eising, *TDOT* 8.331–33; Friedrich Hauck, *TDNT* 1.228–29; Victor P. Hamilton, *DOTTE* 2.947–49; Norman Hillyer, *NIDNTT* 3.443–49; Alexander Sand, *EDNT* 1.57; Larry G. Herr, *ISBE* (2d ed.) 4.286–87; James F. Ross, *IDB* 4.167; Carol Grizzard Browning, *NIDB* 5.44–45; John H. Bratt, *ZPEB* 5.220; Wolfgang Nauck, “Salt as a Metaphor in Instructions for Discipleship,” *ST* 6 (1953) 165–78; Eugene P. Deatrick, “Salt, Soil, Savior,” *BA* 25 (1962) 41–44; F. Charles Fensham, “Salt as Curse in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *BA* 25 (1962) 48–50; W. S. Wood, “The Salt of the Earth,” *JTS* 25 (1924) 167–72; Paul S. Minear, “The Salt of the Earth,” *Int* 51 (1997) 31–41. In German, accessible are Roland Deines, *Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora in Reich des Messias: Mt 5,13–20 als Schlüsseltext der matthäischen Theologie* (WUNT 177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 185–217; Oscar Cullmann, “Die Gleichnis vom Salz,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze 1952–1962* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1966) 192–201; Rudolf Schnackenburg, “Ihr seid das Salz der Erde, das Licht der Welt: Zu Matthäus 5, 13–16,” in *Schriften zum Neuen Testament: Exegese in Fortschritt und Wandel* (Munich: Kösel, 1971) 177–200; Josef Bohumil Soucek, “Salz der Erde und Licht der Welt: Zur Exegese von Matth. 5,13–16,” in Petr Pokorný and Josef Bohumil Soucek, *Bibelauslegung als Theologie* (WUNT 100; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 289–300 (originally in *TZ* 19 [1963] 169–79); Michael Lattke, “Salz der Freundschaft in Mk 9:50c,” *ZNW* 75 (1984) 44–59.

then conclude that "it is quite impossible to decide what one characteristic is to the fore in Mt 5.13."² Nevertheless, I would submit that exegetical certainty is not so hopeless after all, though Davis and Allison are right that no *one* characteristic takes center stage.³ In terms of the actual biblical data, the following study will argue that there are four central and overlapping notions that stand out,⁴ all of which in unison inform our understanding of Christians as "the salt of the earth." In every instance, it is the biblical idea of covenant that provides the cohesive factor. In short, *salt is a covenantal concept*. In seed form, this approach to salt and its effects was anticipated by Paul Minear and William Dumbrell, according to whom salt in the OT is markedly connected with the covenant.⁵ Dumbrell proposes that "the disciples are seen as in the prophetic succession, and thus like their Old Testament counterparts as covenant witnesses and guarantors to their age."⁶

The paper is based on a threefold assumption: the unity of Scripture; the validity of biblical theology (including typology); and the phenomenon of intertextuality. It is not possible to argue for the legitimacy of each, but all three are commonly acknowledged by evangelical scholars and will form the presuppositions that govern the following treatment of texts.

I. SALT IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES⁷

1. *Salt as a symbol of permanence and covenant fidelity*. That salt is commensurate with the twofold concept of covenant stability and covenant fidelity is evidenced by Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; 2 Chron 13:5; and Ezek 43:24.⁸

² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988, 1991, 1997) 1.472–73 (quotation from p. 473). A similar list of alternatives is supplied by Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 205–6.

³ Latham's observation is particularly to be noted: "Symbols speak eloquently precisely because their ambiguity leads to reflection. It is imperative, therefore, that we assume the cultural mentality of the audience and let the symbol speak to us" (*Symbolism* 233). Yet in spite of the deliberate ambiguity inherent in most symbols, David L. Turner's caveat that attempts at interpretive precision are not wise is unnecessary (*Matthew* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008] 155). R. T. France writes to the same effect as Turner: the precise nature of the salt-symbolism is not certain, but in general terms it has to do with a beneficial influence on human relationships (*The Gospel of Matthew* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 174). My contention is that interpretive precision is entirely possible, though precision does not confine itself to any one category of salt as an emblem.

⁴ Frequently, salt is connected with wisdom, as there is evidence to this effect in certain ancient sources. See Hillyer, *NIDNTT* 3.444; Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (AB 27a; New York: Doubleday, 2009) 693. Nauck in particular has championed this view ("Salt as a Metaphor"). We will see below that salt as wisdom does have a bearing on several NT passages, but the coupling of the two is not evident in the Hebrew Bible (Latham, *Symbolism* 226–27). The same is true of salt as a fertilizer (Latham, *Symbolism* 204; France, *Matthew* 174, n. 11). Along similar lines, an equation of salt with Torah might be tempting, but Deines has demonstrated that there is scant evidence for such an assumption (*Gerechtigkeit* 196).

⁵ Minear, "Salt of the Earth" 37; William J. Dumbrell, "The Logic of the Role of the Law in Matthew V 1–12," *NovT* 23 (1981) 12–13.

⁶ Dumbrell, "Role of the Law" 13.

⁷ The biblical and postbiblical materials are also surveyed by Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 189–97.

⁸ Cf. Ezra 6:9; 1 Esdr 6:30; *Ep. Jer.* 28; *Jub.* 21:11; 11 4QTemple 20:13; *Sifra* on Num 18:19; *m. Mid.* 5.3.

a. *Leviticus 2:13*

You shall season all your cereal offerings with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be lacking from your cereal offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.⁹

Judging by its threefold repetition, the operative word of this verse is “salt.” In particular, of such importance is salt that it is called “the salt of your God’s covenant.”¹⁰ Gordon Wenham thinks that this phrase suggests that salt symbolized the covenant itself. In company with numerous scholars, Greeks and Arabs, he notes, are known to have eaten salt together when they concluded covenants.¹¹ As we will see, in the OT salt is explicitly connected with covenant on two further occasions, and in both a “covenant of salt” means an “eternal” covenant (Num 18:19; 2 Chron 13:5). This is so because “[s]alt was something that could not be destroyed by fire or time or any other means in antiquity. The addition of salt to the offering was a reminder that the worshipper was in an eternal covenant relationship with his God. This meant that the worshipper had a perpetual duty to uphold and keep the covenant law.”¹² Such perpetual duty would account for the recurrence of “salt” in the text.¹³

The perpetuity or constancy of the salt added to the offerings is the especial concern of the LXX. Wevers writes that its use of διαπαύσετε is “rather odd.” Yet the translator, he maintains, attempts to render the MT’s תשבית, “make to rest,” which with מן means “to withhold.” He then paraphrases the Greek of 2:13b: “you may not bring to an end, cause to rest, the covenant of salt from your sacrifice.”¹⁴ Given that the LXX was produced at a time when Roman Alexandria was hostile toward Judaism, it may be that the translator intended to underscore the permanence and stability of the covenant, and thus the necessity of covenant faithfulness, by means of the never-ending presence of the salt. At a later period, it was just the Hellenistic incursion into Palestine that would result in widespread apostasy from the “holy covenant”

⁹ John William Wevers calls attention to the fact that the LXX places this entire verse in the second person plural rather than the singular of the MT, according to which the duty to salt the sacrifices falls on the worshipper. The LXX thus makes the salting process the task of the priests. This is an instance of “leveling,” since the preceding verses are also in the plural in both the MT and LXX (*Notes on the Greek Text of Leviticus* [SBLSCS 44; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997] 20).

¹⁰ MT: מלח ברית אלהים; LXX: ἅλα διαθήκης κυρίου.

¹¹ The sacrificial use of salt in Greco-Roman sources is surveyed by Latham, *Symbolism*, 30–35. For the Jewish materials, there are Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 1.472; Str-B 2.21–23; Nauck, “Salt as a Metaphor” *passim*.

¹² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 71. It is for this reason that Ezra 4:14 reflects the custom that those who eat the salt of the palace cannot be witnesses against the king. That is to say, to eat salt with someone is a symbol of loyalty to that person.

¹³ The LXX of Lev 24:7 (as distinct from the MT) requires that salt should be added to the offering of the showbread. Latham thinks that the translator must have known of a practice that included salt in the ritual: “This ritual practice was most appropriate since the offering of the showbread had to be perpetually renewed each sabbath. The offering, and especially the salt, was a symbol of the endurance of the covenant” (*Symbolism* 66). Theologically, this is accurate, but textually Wevers is probably right that the LXX’s “salt” (the plural ἑσονται) in 24:7 is simply intended to bring that verse into line with 2:13 (*Notes on Leviticus* 391).

¹⁴ Wevers, *Notes on Leviticus* 20.

(1 Macc 1:11–15). Philo, writing in a similarly antagonistic milieu, was certainly aware of this dimension of salt (*Spec. Laws*, 1.175, 289).

As a slight variation on the theme, Latham gives covenant faithfulness the primary stress in this passage. In contrast to pagan offerings, which were intended actually to feed the gods, Yahweh does not experience hunger (Ps 50:12–13). Rather, the God of Israel asks of his people fidelity to the bond with himself. The key word, he avers, is found in Lev 2:16: “and the priest is to burn the memorial [אֶזְכֶּרְתָּהּ] from the part of the bread and oil as a burnt offering for Yahweh” (his translation). The offering of flour is called an אֶזְכֶּרְתָּהּ, which is the first word of the prayer that accompanies the offering. Latham then notes that an analogous prayer and rite are found in Deut 26:1–11. This famous “wandering Aramean” confession recalls the history of the chosen people, the Lord’s covenant with the patriarchs, and the entrance into the Promised Land. “There is, therefore, a precise doctrinal content that is attached to the liturgical use of the salt of the covenant.”¹⁵ Keil and Delitzsch contribute to these findings. While leaven and honey were forbidden to be used with any kind of offering, because they produced fermentation and putrefaction, salt was not to be omitted from any sacrificial offering:

The meaning which the salt, with its power to strengthen food and preserve it from putrefaction and corruption, imparted to the sacrifice, was the unbending truthfulness of that self-surrender to the Lord embodied in the sacrifice, by which all impurity and hypocrisy were repelled. . . . As a covenant of this kind was called a “covenant of salt,” equivalent to an indissoluble covenant (Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5), so here the salt added to the sacrifice is designated as salt of the covenant of God, because of its imparting strength and purity to the sacrifice, by which Israel was strengthened and fortified in covenant fellowship with Jehovah.¹⁶

b. Numbers 18:19

All the holy offerings¹⁷ which the people of Israel present to the Lord I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and for your offspring with you.¹⁸

The last clause of the MT of this verse reads: “an eternal covenant of salt.”¹⁹ The LXX, however, renders: “a covenant of eternal salt” (διαθήκη ἀλός αἰωνίου). Wevers thinks that one would have expected αἰωνίου to pertain to διαθήκη rather than ἀλός, because the talk of “a covenant of eternal salt” is “rather

¹⁵ Latham, *Symbolism* 40.

¹⁶ Keil and Delitzsch 1.518. Likewise, Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 192–93; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word, 1992) 31–32.

¹⁷ John William Wevers translates the LXX’s dress for the MT’s “holy offerings,” i.e., ἀφάιρεμα (τῶν ἁγίων), as “dedicatory gift,” with the Greek singular standing for the Hebrew plural (תרומות (הקדשים) *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers* [SBLSCS 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998] 304). On ἀφάιρεμα as a rendering of תרומה, see Wevers, *Notes on Leviticus* 86–87.

¹⁸ Numbers 18:19 reverses the word order of Lev 2:13, from “salt of the covenant” (מלח ברית) to “covenant of salt” (ברית מלח), with the sequence of the former followed by 2 Chron 13:5.

¹⁹ ברית עולם. There is the kindred expression “everlasting covenant” (ברית עולם) in Gen 9:16; 17:7, 19; Num 25:13; 2 Sam 23:5; 1 Chron 16:17; Ps 105:10; Isa 24:5; 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40, 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26; Sir 45:15.

bizarre.” He thus concludes that the translator simply made a mistake.²⁰ Be that as it may, he makes cross reference to Lev 2:13: the “eternal salt” must reflect the “salt of the Lord’s covenant.” “Presumably,” Wevers continues, “the salt as a preservative was thought to make the διαθήκη eternally valid.”²¹ Philip Budd also maintains that the importance of salt as a preservative in the ancient world is attested here. In this regard, agreements between humans were often attested by sacrifice and the phrase “covenant of salt” witnesses to a binding and irrevocable agreement (e.g., Gen 31:51–54).²² In other words, *preservation is tantamount to permanence*.²³

c. 2 Chronicles 13:5

Ought you not to know that the Lord God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?

In the conflict between Abijah and Jeroboam, the former staked a claim to the kingship, with the reminder that the covenant of salt made with David and his descendants entitled him to the throne. Raymond Dillard observes that the context implies that a “covenant of salt” is an “eternal and efficacious covenant,” making the covenant with David as permanent as the covenant made with Israel in the wilderness (Num 18:19).²⁴ Similarly, Keil and Delitzsch term this covenant “irrevocable.”²⁵ The covenant with David is first recorded in 2 Sam 7:11–16, but without the phrase “covenant of salt.” The presence of this choice of words in 2 Chron 13:5 may be a deliberate inversion of Lev 2:13’s “salt of the covenant,” in keeping with Num 18:19. In any event, “covenant of salt” adequately sums up the intention of the promise to David. The immovability or inviolability of David’s throne is assured, so that notwithstanding the perils to come, the Lord’s pledge remained the constant hope of Israel. According to 2 Sam 23:5, David asks: “Yes, does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?” And later, even with the exile looming, Isaiah encourages the people in these terms: “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may

²⁰ Wevers, *Notes on Numbers* 304. Wevers concedes, though, that no copyist or textual group changed the reading to make αἰώνιου modify διαθήκη.

²¹ Wevers, *Notes on Numbers* 304. The important qualification is that “eternal” in the Hebrew Bible is not always eternal. עולם can have reference to the distant future, but as H. D. Preuss states, such duration does necessarily mean “perpetually, for always.” Preuss cites 1 Sam 2:30–31, where the time in question must at some point come to an end (*TDOT* 10.534–35). Therefore, from the NT perspective, the OT covenants were intended to reach a termination point with the advent of the new covenant/new creation/kingdom of God (cf. Eph 2:12: “the covenants of the promise”). This latter-day eschatological complex is everlasting in the strict sense, mainly because of the indestructible life of Christ (Heb 7:16).

²² Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5; Dallas: Word, 1984) 205. Likewise, Hillyer, *NIDNTT* 3.445.

²³ Keil and Delitzsch 1.731, translate the MT’s ברית מלח עולם as “an eternal covenant of salt,” again commenting that the reference is to an “indissoluble covenant” or “inviolable contract.” Corresponding to the eternal covenant of salt is the “perpetual due” (לחק-עולם) of the offerings granted to the priests by Yahweh (also Lev 24:9).

²⁴ Raymond B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WBC 15; Dallas: Word, 2002) 107.

²⁵ Keil and Delitzsch 3.612.

live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David" (Isa 55:3).²⁶

The ensuing context of 2 Chron 13:5 (vv. 8–12) contains a warning to Jeroboam and the Israelites that their golden calves (first mentioned in 11:15) violate the covenant between the Lord and David. In adopting these calves as their gods, the nation has come full circle from Exodus 32. Moreover, Jeroboam and his fellow cultists drove out the priests of the Lord, the descendants of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for themselves like the peoples of other lands (v. 9). In stark contrast to them, Abijah proclaims: "But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not abandoned him. We have priests ministering to the Lord who are descendants of Aaron, and Levites for their service" (v. 10).²⁷ Here is added confirmation that salt as an emblem of permanence is also a badge of faithfulness, as exemplified by Abijah and his company.

d. *Ezekiel 43:24*

You shall present them before the Lord, and the priests shall sprinkle salt upon them and offer them up as a burnt offering to the Lord.

Assuming its place in the cadre of chapters 40–48 of the prophecy, Ezekiel 43 predicts the return of Yahweh to the eschatological temple and stipulates the sacrifices to be offered at that time.²⁸ The various instructions for sacrifice form "the law of the temple," inasmuch as the whole territory on the top of the mountain all around shall be most holy" (v. 12). It is notable that in the nearby context of 44:9–14 idolatrous Levites are to be excluded from the new temple, underscoring the necessity of covenant fidelity in the matter of the offerings. Daniel Block confirms that the addition of salt to the sacrifices evokes Lev 2:13, and then notes: "The preservative qualities of salt apparently rendered it a perfect symbol of the permanence of covenant relationships. The addition of salt to the ritual served as a reminder to Ezekiel and the priests of Yahweh's commitment to his people."²⁹

2. *Salt as a symbol of covenant (table) fellowship.* After an analysis of the role of salt in ancient meal traditions, Latham characterizes the association of the two in the Hebrew Scriptures in these terms:

Both the covenant and sacrifice are solemn acts that establish a relationship of close communion with Yahweh. The sacred meal is a ritual act symbolizing

²⁶ On Isa 55:3, see the excellent study of Peter J. Gentry, "Rethinking the 'Sure Mercies of David' In Isaiah 55:3," *WTJ* 69 (2007) 279–304.

²⁷ See further Annie Jaubert, *La notion d'alliance dans le Judaïsme aux abords de l'ère Chrétienne* (Patristica Sorbonensia 6; Paris: Seuil, 1963) 35–36.

²⁸ On the biblical theology of the passage, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 335–64.

²⁹ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 610–11. I would add Ezra 6:9 as a point of previous reference. It is noteworthy that in Ezekiel's vision of the river flowing from the temple (47:1–12) the swamps and marshes will be left salty. Block explains that the perseveration of some pockets of saltiness is intentional because of the economic benefits of salt as a seasoning and preservative element (*ibid.* 695).

this communion. Since salt was so important as to have been served as a special plate, it became a symbol of the sacred meal. Thus developed the expression “covenant of salt” to identify the special rite of concluding the covenant at Sinai.³⁰

A bit later, Latham adds that there is a quality of salt that makes it especially suitable as a symbol of the covenant and table fellowship, namely, that of permanence. Salt wards off corruption and was used as a preservative in the ancient world. Food, especially fish, was pickled and conserved with salt. The sultry climate of the Near East and the long trips through the desert made this a necessity. For Latham, the basic reason why salt was employed in the sacrifice and covenant was not to indicate permanence as such, but rather the imagery points to salt as preserving something of more value. Salt, in other words, has a value of its own: it was a sign of table fellowship among its partakers. Nevertheless, this “secondary symbolism” of permanence, according to Latham, reinforces the “primary symbolism,” especially as the use of salt as an emblem of friendship at the meal may have been chosen precisely because friendship must be faithful, durable, and incorruptible where Yahweh is concerned.³¹ Eising, furthermore, states the case in these terms:

The “covenant of salt” transfers to the divine covenant the notion of hospitality associated with covenant fellowship, with its subsequent commitment to loyalty and solicitude; Israel is to keep its covenantal obligations, although God, too, is to provide for the election and rights of the covenant partner.³²

To be sure, salt as it relates to table fellowship is not developed to the same degree in the OT as in extrabiblical literature,³³ but its presence in the sacrificial meals bestows on it a notable significance in this regard. And that Israel’s sacred meals, in particular Passover, presage the Lord’s Supper is a virtual given.³⁴

3. Salt as a symbol of purity. Inextricably bound up with covenant, there is the connection of salt with purity.³⁵ Three passages come to the fore: Exod 30:34–36; 2 Kgs 2:19–22; and Ezek 16:4.

a. Exodus 30:34–36

And the Lord said to Moses, “Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy.”

³⁰ Latham, *Symbolism* 63.

³¹ Ibid. 66–67.

³² Eising, *TDOT* 8.333.

³³ Latham, *Symbolism* 50–63.

³⁴ In principle, to be included are eschatological passages such as Isa 25:6–8, which can be compared with the futuristic dimension of the Supper in Luke 22:17–18 (anticipating also John 2:1–11).

³⁵ Dumbrell, “Role of the Law” 12, while recognizing the covenant associations of salt, artificially bifurcates the factors of purity and permanence.

Occurring in the broad section of Exodus 25–40, pertaining to the tabernacle, its services, and priesthood, this injunction *a propos* the incense takes on an importance of its own. John Durham explains that like everything else connected with the tabernacle, the oil of anointment and the incense are to be prepared painstakingly. Also, like the holy and the holiest space, along with all the implements of worship within those areas and before them in the courtyard, the oil and the incense are reserved for use only in the worship of Yahweh. “In every possible way,” writes Durham, “Yahweh’s Presence in Israel was to be conveyed as both real and unique. And Israel’s response, designed to be a part of that message, had also to be both real and unique, costly and reserved for Yahweh alone.”³⁶ Syntactically, in the Hebrew of verse 35, “seasoned with salt” is in apposition to “pure and holy.”³⁷ Here, notions of preservation or permanence adhere to the text, but salt mainly takes on connotations of purity. In similar terms, as noted above, salt added purity to the sacrifice, by which Israel was strengthened and fortified in covenant fellowship with Yahweh. As we will see later on, “seasoned with salt” is probably echoed by Paul in Col 4:6.

b. 2 *Kings* 2:19–22

Now the men of the city said to Elisha, “Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.” He said, “Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it, and said, “Thus says the Lord, I have made this water wholesome; henceforth neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.” So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word which Elisha spoke.³⁸

Virtually at the commencement of Elisha’s ministry, he is called on to purify the water of Jericho. Hillyer appears to be right that the Jericho’s polluted water was a side-effect of the curse pronounced upon anyone who rebuilt the city (Josh 6:26; 1 Kgs 16:34). Thus, the miracle of purification performed by Elisha made use of the symbolism of salt staying corruption and death.³⁹ T. R. Hobbs passes on the suggestion that two events are being described in this story: (1) the curing of the toxicity of the waters by the use of salt; (2) the subsequent desalination of the waters, so that once again they become potable. This would be, in effect, a miracle within a miracle.⁴⁰ In any event, salt as a

³⁶ John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Dallas: Word, 2002) 408.

³⁷ MT: קדש ממלח טהור קדש. The LXX, however, reads: καὶ ποιήσουσιν ἐν αὐτῷ θυμίαμα, μυρεψικὸν ἔργον μυρεψοῦ, μεμιγμένον, καθαρὸν, ἔργον ἅγιον (“And they will make it with perfumed incense, perfumatory work of a perfumer, mixed [compounded], a pure, holy product”). On the translation and text, see John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (SBLSCS 30; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 503. *Tg. Onq.* and *T. Ps-J.* contain similar readings to the LXX, which suggests that all three are based on a textual tradition other than the MT.

³⁸ Josephus, *J. W.* 4.459–75, provides an elaborate commentary on this incident. Cf. Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 194–95.

³⁹ Hillyer, *NIDNTT* 3.444.

⁴⁰ T. R. Hobbs, 2 *Kings* (WBC 13; Dallas: Word, 2002) 24.

purifying agent is at the fore of this text, in keeping with the covenant/cultic connotations of the mineral.⁴¹

c. *Ezekiel 16:4*

And as for your birth, on the day you were born your navel string was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor swathed with bands.

Ezekiel 16 is one of the prophet's many denunciations of Israel's unfaithfulness, as accompanied by predictions of exile and return. The oracle opens with a scathing censure that recasts the covenant people in the role of their pagan enemies. According to verse 2, “Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.” And to make matters even worse, they are depicted as entirely unclean, as a newborn not washed with water or rubbed with salt. Block relates that there are several explanations of the ritual of rubbing with salt, two of which are relevant for our purposes. One is that most interpreters regard the practice as hygienic, having to do with cleaning and strengthening of the infant's skin. The other suggestion relates to the difficulty of laundering the baby's soiled clothing, with the salt applied to prevent the swaddling cloth from becoming sour with harmful bacteria.⁴² Either way (or both), salt is employed as a cleansing element. The irony is that the “pure” people of God have become very impure because of their idolatry.⁴³

4. *Salt as a symbol of curse.* Latham reflects that basic human symbols normally possess an ambivalent character, that is, they are capable of both a positive and a negative usage. “Symbols,” he continues “not only have an ambivalent nature; their capacity for good or evil is often derived from one and the same practical use of the thing chosen as a symbol” (as illustrated by the figures of fire and water).⁴⁴ Given that salt played a symbolic role in the blessings of the covenant, it should come as no surprise that the inverse is also present when salt stands for the curses of the covenant. To any reader of the

⁴¹ Hillyer, *NIDNTT* 3.445, relates that in rabbinic Judaism the cultic significance is weakened, quoting *Sifra Num.* 118 on Num 18:19: “This is an eternal covenant with the Lord concluded with salt. Scripture (= God) made a covenant with Aaron by means of something (salt) which is not only in itself wholesome but which keeps other things (e.g., the covenant) wholesome.” The effect is that “Rabbinic instructions to the disciples of scribes included the exhortation to be modest and of a humble spirit, industrious and (lit.) salted.”

⁴² Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 475.

⁴³ Leslie C. Allen recalls that exposure of unwanted newborns was common in the ancient world. The infant was abandoned, still attached to the placenta, and left to die. In the ancient Near East, washing, cleaning, and clothing the newborn child had the force of legitimation on the parents' part. By failing to do so they had relinquished all rights to the child (*Ezekiel 1–19* [WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 2002] 237). If this cultural component is a part of the text, it is as though God is prepared to expose and abandon Israel (at the time of the exile). The Ezekiel Targum projects 16:4 back to Israel's Egyptian captivity and actually draws a comparison with an exposed infant: “And also, when your forefathers went down to Egypt, they were sojourners in a land not their own. The congregation of Israel was enslaved and oppressed. It was like a new-born child who is abandoned in the field. . . .”

⁴⁴ Latham, *Symbolism* 73, 74 (quotation from p. 74).

Hebrew Scriptures, the combination of blessing and cursing is a commonplace. Most outstandingly, there is the sequence of the two in Deuteronomy 27–32, with their outworking in the Deuteronomistic history and the prophetic books.⁴⁵ The ensuing passages from Tanakh (and beyond) exemplify this “dark side” of salt.

a. *Genesis 19:24–26*

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife behind him looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.

In one of the most dramatic scenes from the Bible, the demolition of the cities of the plain is pictured as one of utter and total destruction. Lot and his family were forewarned of the coming judgment: “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the valley; flee to the hills, lest you be consumed” (19:17). It was in direct defiance of this order that Lot's wife looked back at Sodom and consequently was metamorphosed into a pillar of salt. Why she looked back is not stated in the text. Possibly, it was simple curiosity due to the noise of the descending fire and brimstone, or, more likely, it was a longing and wistful gaze, with a desire to be part of the now-destroyed culture. Gordon Wenham proposes that by disobeying a God-given instruction she forfeited her God-offered salvation: “In looking back, she identified herself with the damned town.” Moreover, says Wenham, the episode creates sympathy for Lot, as regards both his less-than-perfect behavior displayed in his reluctance to leave Sodom and flee to the mountains and in his inebriation, about to be related. It is not so much Lot's bereavement that evokes sympathy as the fact that he was a husband who did not enjoy whole-hearted support from his wife during their residence in Sodom: “While the narrator does not condone Lot's lapses, he helps the reader appreciate a contributory cause and suggests why his daughters had few scruples about their behavior [Gen 19:30–38]. Like their mother, they too had imbibed a love of Sodom and its attitudes.”⁴⁶ Wenham's understanding of the episode is backed by that of Dale Allison.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Dennis J. McCarthy has shown that the Deuteronomic pattern of blessing and cursing assumes its place within the ANE milieu, specifically the sort found in the treaties from Mesopotamia and Syria (*Treaty and Covenant: A Study in form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* [AnBib 21a; 2d ed.; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978] 172–87). The same formula crops up in the Qumran Scrolls. See Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: In the Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 116–17; Martin G. Abegg, “The Covenant of the Qumran Sectarrians,” in *The Concept of Covenant in the Second Temple Period* (eds. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; JSJSup 71; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 91–96.

⁴⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994) 59. Gerhard Von Rad's comment is likewise apropos: “Where God intervenes in a direct act on earth man cannot adopt the stance of a spectator . . . before divine judgment there is only the possibility of being smitten or of escaping, but no third alternative” (*Genesis: A Commentary* [OTL; 2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972] 221–22).

⁴⁷ Dale C. Allison, *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 78–81, 95–98. Allison provides a close analysis of the MT and LXX of Gen 19:26, along with evidence from the targums, Josephus, Philo, and the history of interpretation.

Wenham's and Allison's readings are supported by several Jewish sources (see below) and Luke 17:32. In Luke's apocalyptic discourse, the disciples are warned: "On that day, let him who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away; and likewise let him who is in the field not turn back" (v. 31). Then follows the caution: "Remember Lot's wife." Joel Green comments that the warning "both interprets her action as the manifestation of the unwillingness to relinquish everything at time of judgment and serves to warn Jesus' followers against misplaced values."⁴⁸ Especially when read in light of the accompanying OT passages, the transmogrification of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt signifies that she became object of cursing because of her disobedience to the Lord's command. That her transformation into salt took the form of a pillar makes her doom a cautionary memorial for passersby.⁴⁹ Allison adds that in line with the Sodom traditions, Luke 17:24 stresses that one needs to be prepared for the end, because it will come unexpectedly, like lightning. Therefore, the lesson of Sodom is that the disciples should be ever-vigilant, for the Son of Man may return at a time when he is not expected.⁵⁰

b. Deuteronomy 29:22–23

And the generation to come, your children who rise up after you, and the foreigner who comes from a distant land, would say, when they see the afflictions of that land and the sicknesses with which the Lord has made it sick—the whole land brimstone and salt, and a burnt-out waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the Lord overthrew in his anger and wrath.

Occurring in the thick of the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27–32, Deut 29:23 likens the coming judgment (exile) to the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵¹ These verses (up to v. 27) are similar in form and content to the prophets (e.g. Jer 5:15–19; 22:8–10; cf. 1 Kgs 9:8–9) and ancient Near Eastern texts.⁵² "Brimstone and salt" combine to create the horrendous prospect of a land that can only be described as a "burnt-out waste" in which nothing can grow.⁵³ Duane Christensen draws out further the impact of this presentiment: "When human beings cast God out, a blight comes upon the created order itself—with brimstone and salt burnt is all her land; it is not sown, and

⁴⁸ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 634.

⁴⁹ Josephus claims to have seen the pillar (*Ant.* 1.203). Other stone memorials, albeit of a positive sort, figure in the history of Israel (Josh 4:6–9, 20–24; 1 Sam 7:12).

⁵⁰ Allison, *Intertextual Jesus* 97.

⁵¹ The account of the destruction in Gen 19:24–29 mentions only Sodom and Gomorrah, but Gen 14:8 does include all four cities of the plain, Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim. Keil and Delitzsch 1.974, add that brimstone and salt allude to the region of the Salt Sea and the towns of the valley of Siddim, which, they say, resembled paradise before their destruction. Other notices of the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah are Isa 1:9; Jer 49:18; 50:40; Hos 11:8; Amos 4:11.

⁵² *ANET* 299–300.

⁵³ John William Wevers notes that $\mu\tau$ should be rendered: "With brimstone and salt all its ground is burned." But the LXX has the participle $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\kappa\epsilon\kappa\alpha\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\nu$ modifying $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha$ rather than $\gamma\eta$, that is, it is the salt that is burned, not the ground (*Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy* [SBLSCS 39; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995] 474). Either way, the effect is the same.

it produces nothing.’”⁵⁴ Peter Craigie fills out the picture by pointing to two facts: (1) the reason for the potential devastation would be the (idolatrous) abandonment of the covenant; (2) the tragic condition resulting from Israel’s desertion of the bond with Yahweh is set in stark contrast to the high ideals of the covenant described in Deut 29:9–14.⁵⁵ The shock effect of this oracle is that if Israel succumbs to idolatry, she will prove to be no better than the infamous cities of the plain and will, therefore, receive the same retribution as they.

c. *Judges 9:45*

And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city, and killed the people that were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.

According to the Judges narrative, Abimelech’s reign over Israel was short but violent. It was by murdering seventy of his brothers that he became king of Shechem (Judg 9:1–6). After three years, Shechem revolted, led by Gaal, the son of Ebed (9:22–33). When Abimelech became aware of the insurrection, he took vengeance by razing Shechem and sowing it with salt (9:30–45), afterward burning the city’s tower (9:46–49). The precise significance of Abimelech’s sowing Shechem with salt is matter of disagreement among scholars. But in light of such parallels as Jer 48:9 (“Set aside salt for Moab, for she would fly away; her cities shall become a desolation, with no inhabitant in them”) and Sir 43:19 (“He pours the hoarfrost upon the earth like salt, and when it freezes, it becomes pointed thorns”), it makes the most sense to think that the salt is an emblem of infertility and perpetual ruin, because heavy quantities of salt would stifle the future growth of any vegetation (the very point of Deut 29:23). As such, the salt stands for the total devastation of the city. Keil and Delitzsch concur: “Strewing the ruined city with salt . . . was a symbolical act, signifying that the city was to be turned for ever into a barren salt desert. Salt ground is a barren desert.”⁵⁶ Job 39:5–6 is a kindred text: “Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to whom I have given the steppe for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place?” The “salt land” (MT: מלחה; LXX: ἁλμυρίδα) is unfruitful and incapable of culture.⁵⁷ Granted, the ideology of Yahweh’s covenant is not directly at the fore in Judg 9:45, but I would argue that in Abimelech’s mind the revolt of Shechem constituted a breach of loyalty and thus warranted a retribution commensurate with the city’s refusal to acknowledge his hegemony over it.

d. *Psalms 107:33–34*

He turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste, because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.

⁵⁴ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (WBC 6b; Dallas: Word, 2002) 727.

⁵⁵ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 360.

⁵⁶ Keil and Delitzsch 2.267. Fensham (“Salt as Curse”) shows that Abimelech’s actions were in line with ANE practices. Herr (*ISBE*, 4.286) passes on the suggestion of John Gray that this ritual use of salt signified a complete break with the past.

⁵⁷ Keil and Delitzsch 4.672. Likewise, according to Eising, *TDOT* 8.332, “Salt Sea” (Gen 14:3; Josh 3:16; 12:3; 18:19) has negative connotations, as do “City of Salt” (Josh 15:62) and “Valley of Salt” (2 Sam 8:13; 1 Chron 18:12; 2 Chron 25:11; 2 Kings 14:7). See also Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 189, n. 256.

Psalm 107 as a whole can be termed “thanksgiving to a delivering God,” who has gathered his redeemed from all quarters of the earth (vv. 2–3), delivered his people from the desert (vv. 4–9), prison (vv. 10–16), distress because of their sins (vv. 17–22), and the sea (vv. 23–32). Yet there is another side to the story: because of the wickedness of inhabitants of the land, he turns rivers into a desert, springs of water into a thirsty ground, and a fruitful land into a salty waste (vv. 33–34). John Goldingay, following the LXX and the Targum to this Psalm, takes verses 33–41 to refer to past events. The Targum, in particular, refers these happenings to the natural disaster in the time of Joel.⁵⁸ Goldingay structures the two parts of this section of the Psalm as the movement from trouble, to divine action to undo the trouble, and then to consequent blessings. With reverberations of Isa 42:15; 50:2, which themselves reverse Isa 41:18; 43:19, the psalmist declares that God’s judgment will transform an actually fruitful land into one “totally incapable of producing anything. . . . Here, Yhwh has deliberately turned land useful to humanity into this other kind of land.”⁵⁹ The simile stems from the wilderness as the antipode of the fruitful Garden of Eden. Allen supplements the portrait by terming verses 33–41 a declaration of God’s control of life in the land. When necessary, the God of the storm can cause similar disruption on land.⁶⁰ Besides the echoes of Isa 42:15; 50:2, there is an allusion to the overthrow of Sodom (Gen 19:24–29; Deut 29:23) and Jer 12:4.

e. Jeremiah 17:5–6

Thus says the Lord: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.”⁶¹

Jeremiah warns of what will be Israel’s circumstance in exile, if they trust in human beings (“flesh”) and turn their hearts away from the Lord. Their potential dwelling in “the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land” stands in parallel to verse 4: “You shall loosen your hand from your heritage which I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land which you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled which shall

⁵⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms. Volume 3: Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 256. Leslie C. Allen also looks to past events and adds that Psalm 107 is an impressive example of how the written word can come alive for a later generation of God’s people and speak to them in a new way that corresponds to their particular situation. “It is a mark of the living word of God that it is not exhausted in an ancient situation; nor does it necessarily require repetition of history to become valid again but runs freely, challenging a new generation of believers to see fresh correspondence between word and experience and to claim that word as relevant to their own lives” (*Psalms 101–50* [WBC 21; Dallas: Word, 2002] 91).

⁵⁹ Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150* 257.

⁶⁰ Allen, *Psalms 101–50* 90.

⁶¹ Latham, *Symbolism* 76, maintains that Jeremiah echoes a song of Atrahasis (*ANET* 105–6): “During the nights let the fields turn white, let the broad plain bring forth salt crystals, let her bosom revolt, that no plant come forth, no grain sprout.” Whether or not Jeremiah’s use of salt here reflects Atrahasis (unlikely, I should think), it makes perfect sense on its own terms, given its covenantal proclivities.

burn forever.”⁶² Given the interplay of the two statements, “fire” and “salt” are analogous ways of depicting the same reality—the curse of the covenant, owing to Israel’s idolatry.

f. *Jeremiah 48:9*

Set aside salt for Moab, for she will surely fall; her towns shall become a desolation, with no inhabitant in them.

The translation of the first clause of the verse (תִּנְּוּ צִיָּא לְמוֹאָב) is not altogether certain. One reading is “give wings to Moab,” but the other is “set aside salt for Moab.”⁶³ J. A. Thompson points out that the latter rendering is based on Ugaritic, with the comment that sowing cities with salt as a sign of their destruction was well known in the ancient Near East.⁶⁴

g. *Zephaniah 2:9*

Therefore, as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever.

This oracle against Moab foretells that Israel’s ancient enemy will fare like other infamous peoples. In a probable echo of Gen 3:18, the land will be reduced to chaos, with salt pits thrown in for good measure. Salt, obviously enough, retains its significance as curse.

The image of salt as curse carries over into Second Temple sources.⁶⁵ Sirach 39:22–27 can say, on the one hand, that God turns fresh water into salt water, so that the nations will experience his wrath. Contrariwise, salt is reckoned among the elements necessary for life. The sage thus declares: “From the beginning good things have been created for the good, just as evils have been created sinners. . . . All these things prove good to the godly, just as they turn into evils for the sinful.” Patrick Skehan understands the fertile land that God turns into a salt marsh to be Sodom and Gomorrah, with the additional remark that sowing a field with salt, which rendered the soil barren and useless, was a severe punishment that a conqueror would inflict on a defeated enemy.⁶⁶ The pericope of 39:22–27 is to be compared with 43:19: “He pours the hoarfrost upon the earth like salt, and when it freezes, it becomes pointed thorns.”

In his observations on Lot’s wife, Philo, like Ben Sira, contemplates the two-sided character of salt (*Qu. Gen.* 4.52). His real stress, however, is on salt’s punitive symbolism. He poses the question, “Why did his wife look backward

⁶² The Jeremiah Targum likens the uninhabited land (wilderness) to Sodom.

⁶³ The Targum has: “Make the crown pass away from Moab; for she will surely go into captivity. . . .”

⁶⁴ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 704. For a more detailed philological discussion, see Gerald L. Keown, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC 27; Dallas: Word, 1995) 313. Like Thomson, Keown draws a parallel with Judg 9:45.

⁶⁵ The same figure of speech is also common enough in ANE literature. See Latham, *Symbolism*, 78–80; Fensham, “Salt as Curse” 49–50.

⁶⁶ Patrick Skehan (with Alexander A. Di Lella), *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation with Notes* (AB 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987) 459–60.

and become a pillar of salt and not some other material?” In answering, he states that literal meaning is very clear. By transgressing the commandment of the angels not to look back, she paid the penalty, though it was not the same penalty as that of the Sodomites, because the city was destroyed with sulphur and fire, whereas the woman was changed into the nature (φύσις) of salt. “All these indicate unproductiveness and unfruitfulness, for when the region was burnt up, the salt-plain was no less unfruitful.” Philo then applies the incident to his readers. “Thus, (Scripture) wishes (to admonish) you by producing even more wonderful miracles. Just as in the case of Sodom, that which was light by nature was made to bear downward like those things which are heavy by nature, so did salt, one of those things which were made for well-being and endurance, become a cause of ruin and destruction.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Philo maintains that Lot’s spouse was “enamored of Sodom” (*Leg. All.* 3.213; cf. *Fug.* 121–22; *Som.* 1.246–48) and desired to “gaze round at the old familiar objects” (*Ebr.* 164).⁶⁸

Wisdom 10:6–7 contains a reminder to its readers of the destruction of the cities of the plain:

Wisdom rescued a righteous man when the ungodly were perishing; he escaped the fire that descended on the Five Cities. Evidence of their wickedness still remains: a continually smoking wasteland, plants bearing fruit that does not ripen, and a pillar of salt standing as a monument to an unbelieving soul.

In the Genesis account, the punishment of Lot’s wife was so severe because of her longing to return to a place of godlessness. This writer thus sees in her an instance of an “unbelieving soul” (ἀπιστούσα ψυχή). The point is not that she stared in unbelief at the destruction of Sodom because she necessarily doubted God’s ability to destroy or save. Rather, she did not believe that what wisdom had saved her to was better than what she had been forced to leave behind. She is, therefore, a prime example of one who distrusted God by not seeking him “in sincerity of heart” (ἐν ἀπλότῃ καρδίᾳ 1:1–2). She loved the world, not righteousness, and was, pointedly, an apostate from the faith of Yahweh.⁶⁹

The author of 1QH 8:21–26 represents himself as a gardener responsible for the divine planting (of Israel); it is by his hand that God ensures the growth and productivity of the community. But if the Teacher takes away his hand, then the garden will become a juniper in the wilderness and its stock like nettles in a salt-marsh and in its ditches will grow thickets and thistles; its trees will bear wild fruit, and before the heat its leaves will wither. Like

⁶⁷ Translation by Ralph Marcus, *LCL, Philo: Supplement 1*, 330.

⁶⁸ See the tabulation of additional passages by Lattke, “Salz der Freundschaft” 56–58.

⁶⁹ See further David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 43; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 217; Don Garlington, “The Obedience of Faith”: A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context (WUNT 2/38; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991) 81–82. *Tg. Neof.* maintains that Lot’s wife was “from the daughters of Sodomites” and that she “looked back to see what would be the end of her father’s house.” *Tg. Ps.-J.* likewise makes the wife a native of the city and adds that “because she had sinned through salt by publicizing (the presence) of the afflicted ones, behold she was made into a pillar of salt.”

Zeph 2:9, the text probably echoes Gen 3:18, whereby salt is coordinated with the other symbols of curse and chaos.

The bottom line of all the salt as curse texts, biblical and postbiblical, is well put by Fensham (on Judg 9:45): "salt is regarded as effecting infertility. One of the greatest catastrophes to overtake the Near Eastern man is infertility. This idea is then used as a curse against a person who breaks a covenant, and is extended to his property. The curse is demonstrated by the ritual act of sowing salt."⁷⁰

II. DISCIPLES AS THE SALT OF THE EARTH

As our study moves into the NT materials, it will be proposed that the several texts, to one degree or the other, display an awareness of the significance of salt as a covenantal concept. Only Matt 5:13 uses the actual phrase "the salt of the earth," but the other passages conceptually tie into the phraseology of the First Gospel.⁷¹

1. *Matthew 5:13*

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

Within the cadre of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (SM), it is illuminating in itself that the couplet of Matt 5:13–14, depicting the disciples as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, is integrally attached to the Beatitudes as a kind of postscript.⁷² The Beatitudes themselves are not "entrance requirements" into the kingdom, but rather contain a decided eschatology of the "Already."⁷³ That is to say, because they exhibit the qualities signaled by the indicatives of Matt 5:3–12, the disciples are proof positive that the kingdom is a reality in the world. It is just in their capacity as "the poor in spirit," "those who mourn," "the meek," "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," "the merciful," "the pure in heart," "the peacemakers," and the "persecuted" that Jesus' followers *are* salt and light and, as such, the eschatological reality

⁷⁰ Fensham, "Salt as Curse" 50.

⁷¹ Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 197–217, supplies a wealth of exegetical material on Matt 5:13 and parallels.

⁷² Matthew is unique in placing these metaphors side by side. Salt is found alone in Mark 9:49–50; Luke 14:34–35, and the figures of a lampstand and light appear in Mark 4:21–23; Luke 8:16–17; 11:33–36.

⁷³ Robert A. Guelich, "The Matthean Beatitudes: 'Entrance Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *JBL* 95 (1976) 415–34; idem, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 109–11. Guelich writes: "Instead of ethics swallowing up eschatology in Matthew, we have just the reverse. The implicit attitudes and conduct of the Beatitudes as well as the demands of 5:20–48 are only intelligible in light of that new eschatological moment between God and humanity established by Jesus' person and ministry" (*Sermon on the Mount* 111). Guelich's approach to the Beatitudes is valid for the whole of the SM, which too often has been read as a "book of virtues" devoid of eschatological content.

of the kingdom is actualized in their persons as the subjects of his reign.⁷⁴ In other words, *they* are God's eschatological blessing for the creation; *they* are the exemplars of the "better righteousness" now required of the people of God (5:20).⁷⁵ As added confirmation, both 5:13 and 14 commence on an emphatic note: "*You* are" (Ὑμεῖς ἐστε). Allison's explanation of the emphasis is entirely plausible, namely, *you* are the salt of the earth and *you* are the light of the world probably would have struck most Jewish ears as implicitly polemical, because it is not the Torah, the Temple, Jerusalem, or some group within Israel that are salt and light, but rather Jesus' followers.⁷⁶ *They* are the embodiment of the values of the latter-day rule of God.

In descending to the particulars of 5:13, there is the expected disparity of opinion among the commentators regarding the import of salt. Donald Hagner analyzes the problem by passing on the most popular options: preservation, purifying, seasoning, and fertilizing, with the possibility that salt is a metaphor for other associations, like wisdom, sacrifice, and the covenant. Hagner then proposes that plausible arguments can be made for each of these associations and to emphasize any one of them is to surpass the text itself and to allegorize it. He then suggests that it is best to take the metaphor broadly and inclusively as signifying something that is vitally important to the world in a religious sense, since salt was vitally necessary for everyday life. The disciples, therefore, are "vitally significant and necessary to the world in their witness to God and his kingdom." In this regard, "the salt of the earth" is not fundamentally different from "the light of the world."⁷⁷ We recall, along these lines, Dumbrell's assertion that "the disciples are seen as in the prophetic succession, and thus like their Old Testament counterparts as covenant witnesses and guarantors to their age."⁷⁸

Hagner's approach to the figure of salt serves as a useful springboard to the viewpoint of this undertaking. He is right that the interpretive options are not to be limited to one, although allegorization is not necessarily the byproduct of such a restriction. It is likewise correct that salt is to be taken broadly as something vitally important for everyday life. My qualification is that while more than one connotation is attached to the salt-metaphor, there is an ideology

⁷⁴ Dale C. Allison ("The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *JBL* 106 [1987] 431) observes that the reader is not told how to become salt and light. This is because 5:13–16 is a general heading or superscription to the SM, which stands above the detailed parenthesis proper. The verses are a transition in which Jesus moves from the life of the blessed future (promised in 5:3–12) to the demands of life in the present (5:17–7:12). I would just qualify that verses preceding the salt and light pericope are as telling as the rest of the SM to follow.

⁷⁵ See Don Garlington, "The 'Better Righteousness': Matthew 5:20," *BBR* 20 (2010) 479–502.

⁷⁶ Allison, "Structure" 431, n. 22. See also Davies/Allison, *Matthew* 1.471; Nauck, "Salt as a Metaphor" 177; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 249–50. In another place, Allison teases out the connection of Matt 5:13–16 with Exod 19:5–6 and Moses' reception of the law on Sinai (*The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 326).

⁷⁷ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (WBC 33a; Dallas: Word, 1993) 99. On "the light of the world," see the insightful discussion of Dumbrell, "Role of the Law" 14–16, and at length Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 217–33.

⁷⁸ Dumbrell, "Role of the Law" 13 (cf. 16). In 5:12, the disciples are directly associated with the prophets.

that binds its various dimensions jointly, namely, the concept of covenant. It is true that Hagner cites covenant as one of the several alternatives, but my proposal is that covenant is not simply one possibility among others, but rather it is the “glue” that makes them all “stick” together. The result is that salt is to be interpreted broadly, but not indistinctly or imprecisely. If I may, I will draw an analogy, by way of illustration. In a consideration of the *ordo salutis* in relation to justification and related ideas, Anthony Hoekema likens the salvific process to a pentagonal building whose five walls are constructed of experiences which begin and continue simultaneously (as opposed to a series of successive steps along a straight line). This pentagon is constructed of regeneration, conversion, justification, sanctification, and perseverance, all of which exhibit an overlapping and interpenetration of concepts.⁷⁹ The same illustration may be applied to Matt 5:13. If salt is the “building,” then its interconnecting “walls” are: salt as permanence and covenant fidelity (in conjunction with the sacrifices); salt as covenant (table) fellowship; salt as purity; salt as curse. To take it a step further, the “property” on which the structure is situated is the covenant.

Understood along these lines, believers as “the salt of the earth” can be conceived of in terms of the usage of salt in the OT (and later literature).⁸⁰ For one, as salt, they exhibit covenant fidelity and so preserve the continuance of the covenant. The evidence from Lev 2:13; Num 18:19; 2 Chron 13:5; and Ezek 43:24 argues strongly in this direction, whose bottom line is that preservation is tantamount to permanence.⁸¹ As a subset of this category, the question arises whether the disciples are conceived of as sacrifices in their own persons. Cullmann, Schnackenburg, and Soucek, in particular, argue for their willingness to sacrifice themselves.⁸² Luz passes on the same proposal by Michael Krämer that the presence of disciples in the world makes them a well-pleasing sacrifice.⁸³ Given that the salt added to the sacrifice made it an integral part of the offering, this equation makes sense, especially in light of persecution bound to come upon those who are faithful to the cause of the kingdom (Matt 5:11–12). In the second place, by virtue of their identification as salt, the disciples partake of covenant or table fellowship and thus form a society in communion with the covenant Lord. We recall Latham’s conjunction of the “primary” and “secondary” symbolism of salt as it pertains to this brand of fellowship. Primarily, salt as an emblem of friendship at the meal was chosen because friendship must be faithful, durable, and incorruptible where Yahweh is concerned. Secondarily, there is a quality of salt that makes it especially suitable as a symbol of the covenant and table fellowship, namely, permanence. Salt wards off corruption and was used as a preservative in the

⁷⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 16.

⁸⁰ “All three Synoptics . . . are transmitting the same rich salt-symbolism they inherited from Jewish Culture” (Latham, *Symbolism* 192). Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 196–97, has arrived at similar conclusions as those advanced herein.

⁸¹ In agreement is Soucek, “Salz der Erde” 294–95.

⁸² Cullmann, “Gleichnis vom Salz”; Schnackenburg, “Thr seid das Salz”; Soucek, “Salz der Erde.”

⁸³ Luz, *Matthew 1–7* 205, n. 26.

ancient world.⁸⁴ Third, the disciples impart purity to the creation, thereby rendering it better than before. The connection should be fairly obvious, given the backdrop of the Scriptures (Exod 30:34–36; 2 Kgs 2:19–22; Ezek 16:4). Finally, there is the factor of curse. At first glance, the identification of the Jesus' followers as curse might seem strange, until we remember that curse is tantamount to judgment. In one way or the other, all the passages considered above point in this direction (Gen 19:24–26; Deut 29:22–23; Judg 9:45; Ps 107:33–34; Jer 17:5–6; 48:9; Zeph 2:9; Sir 39:22–27; Wis 10:6–7; Philo, *Qu. Gen.* 4.52; *Leg. All.* 3.213; *Fug.* 121–22; *Som.* 1.246–48; *Ebr.* 164; 1QH 8:21–26). Particularly relevant is the curse = judgment meted out on Lot's wife. The point is this: when the world rejects the message of the disciples, their witness to the blessings of salvation turns into a judgment against it.⁸⁵ This punitive function of salt is actually not so unexpected, given its two-sided character as both blessing and cursing in the Jewish and ancient Near Eastern environment.⁸⁶

These applications of the OT salt texts to Matt 5:13 have to be weighed in view of the full phrase "the salt of the earth" (τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς), because "[s]alt is not for itself; it is seasoning for food. In the same way the disciples are there not for themselves but for the earth."⁸⁷ Wood fittingly compares "the salt of the earth" with "the light of the world." Just as Jesus' followers illuminate the world and dispel its darkness, as salt they purify and sanctify the earth. They preserve it from decay and corruption as a "sweetening and wholesome influence."⁸⁸ Likewise, according to Turner, "The image of salt should be viewed contextually as in some way analogous to the more accessible image of light. Salt is thus a metaphor for exercising a beneficial influence on the world, in a manner analogous to the way light is beneficial in illumining darkness"⁸⁹ The earth, accordingly, is the sphere of the disciples' influence. Hans Dieter Betz writes that the earth is the place where the community of the Sermon on the Mount lives. Therefore, "salt of the earth" means that "faithful disciples must get involved with this earth and this life. They are to regard themselves as a most important ingredient of this life . . . they must

⁸⁴ Latham, *Symbolism* 66–67.

⁸⁵ Wenham's reflection on Lot's wife is much to the point here also: it was by disobeying a God-given instruction that she forfeited her God-offered salvation; it was in looking back that she identified herself with the damned town of Sodom (*Genesis* 16–50 59). She thus provides a "type" of the final destruction of an unbelieving world.

⁸⁶ By means of a similar symbol, when the apostles shake the dust from their feet, a village comes under judgment (Matt 10:14–15; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:10–12). See Marius Reiser, *Jesus and Judgment: The Eschatological Proclamation in Its Jewish Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 257–58. Reiser asserts that there is no other record of this gesture that would shed further light on it. R. T. France, however, links the action to the rabbis who would shake the dust of Gentile territory from their feet in order to avoid carrying its defilement with them (*The Gospel of Mark* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 250).

⁸⁷ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7 206.

⁸⁸ Wood, "Salt of the Earth" 170.

⁸⁹ Turner, *Matthew* 155. The genitive τῆς γῆς can be taken variously. The most likely candidates are partitive and objective.

be part of the dirt out of which this earth is made.”⁹⁰ Betz continues that the lives of the disciples are no doubt lived under hazardous conditions, but then resists the several scholars who posit that salt points to sacrifice, suffering, and self-denial. The reasoning is that the disciples are not “passive and helpless victims” but “movers and shakers” and “doers.”⁹¹ But the fact is that the salt and the sacrificial offerings went together, and in the process of moving and shaking there are numerous “hazardous conditions” to be endured passively and often as helpless (5:11–12).

“Earth” has appeared previously in 5:5, and its equivalent, the “world,” crops up not too long afterward in 5:14. In neither of these instances is the reference to soil as such but the domain of human beings under the universal Lordship of God.⁹² Robert Gundry, then, is right that Matthew makes the metaphor of salt serve the motif of worldwide evangelism.⁹³ It is not possible to construct a biblical theology of such entities such as “earth,” “world,” and “land.”⁹⁴ Suffice it to say that “earth” in 5:5 is eschatological and pertains to the age to come. Luz’s comments on the verse are apropos: the center of attention is the earth as a whole, not only the land of Israel, because already in the Scriptures the traditional promise of the land already had been transposed into the cosmic realm (Ps 37:11; Isa 61:7).⁹⁵ In 5:13, 14, the focal point of the parallel terms “earth” and “world” are more “this-worldly,” but given

⁹⁰ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–40)* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 158. Betz adds later that the disciples should get involved with the earth, but in such a way as to exercise power as the salt of the earth. Contrariwise, they should not get mixed up with the earth as trash gets mixed up with other trash: “Small and unassuming as salt is, its power is enormous, but only as long as it acts in the way it is supposed and equipped to act” (ibid. 160). Cf. Roman Heiligenthal, *Werke als Zeichnen: Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung der menschlichen Taten im Frühjudentum, Neuen Testament und Frühchristentum* (WUNT 2/9; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983) 116–17.

⁹¹ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount* 158.

⁹² Vis-à-vis interpreters who would restrict “earth” and “world” to Israel, Luz retorts that we have in them instances of “Matthean universalism” (*Matthew* 1–7 205). Regarding the land, John Nolland agrees: “Though Matthew continues to tell a very Jewish story, the universal significance of what Jesus has set in motion is allowed to show through” (*The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005] 213).

⁹³ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 75. Cf. Guelich, *Sermon on the Mount* 130; Eckhard J. Schnabel, “The First Gospel and Matthew’s Mission: Narrative, Theological, and Historical Perspectives,” in *Society of Biblical Literature Papers 2005* (http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/Schnabel_First.pdf) 5; Paul Foster, *Community, Law and Mission in Matthew’s Gospel* (WUNT 2/177; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 162–63.

⁹⁴ The standard works on the land, etc., continue to be W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (OBT; 2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), to which can now be added Gary M. Burge, *The Bible and the Land* (Ancient Context, Ancient Faith; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); idem, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010). Relevant also is Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

⁹⁵ Luz, *Matthew* 1–7 194–95. The only qualification is that the cosmic realm does include “the other-worldly and beyond,” in that the earth itself prefigures what Heb 2:5 calls “the world to come.” See Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962) 270–75.

the eschatological content of the Beatitudes generally, even they partake of a future dimension. The end result is that the followers of Christ function as salt and light not only in this life but in the life to come. It is their presence in God’s creation that insures the type of existence envisioned by the “very good” of Gen 1:31, and, beyond that, the perfection of a redeemed cosmos. It is Rev 21:1–22:5 which portrays the new heavens and the new earth as simultaneously a city, a garden, and a temple, into which no unclean thing will enter (21:27). The influence of believers thus has eternal ramifications. In a departure from traditional exegesis, Minear discerns that “the salt of the earth” (in connection with “the light of the world”) is instrumental in reversing the curse imposed by sin and returning it to its pristine goodness. The effect of the salt, therefore, is cosmic in scope.⁹⁶

It is just the “saltiness” of the disciples that must not be lost, because then the salt is “no longer good for anything. . . .” By definition, salt is distinguished by its taste (à la Job 6:6), and its loss signals its uselessness.⁹⁷ It has been observed for some time that the Greek verb selected to convey the notion of the salt losing its “savor” (μωραίνω) is unexpected. At face value, the word means, in the passive, both “become foolish” and “become tasteless or insipid” (BDAG, 663; LSJ, 1158). Matthew Black (in tandem with John Lightfoot) remarks that μωρανθῆ suits well with תפל, which signifies both “unsavory” and a “fool.”⁹⁸ The Greek rendering, says Black, represents an interpretation: “the ‘insipid’ salt refers to foolish disciples.”⁹⁹ At heart, then, there is no drastic difference between these two sides of μωραίνω.¹⁰⁰

However, the choice of this particular verb transcends the semantic level to encompass a characteristic feature of Matthew’s theology, namely, the notion of foolishness. In a previous study, I endeavored to develop a seminal thought of Gundry, who insightfully observed that “fool(ish)” in Matthew always has to do with those who are excluded from the eschatological kingdom.¹⁰¹ The up-

⁹⁶ Minear, “Salt of the Earth” 37–40. Minear further suggests that, like the prophets, Jesus’ persecuted followers cauterize and purify the earth by the shedding of their blood (ibid. 38).

⁹⁷ The literal reality on which this figure has been understood variously. Luz, *Matthew 1–7* 206, maintains that since Jesus envisages an actual deterioration of the salt, the only explanation is that Matthew must be thinking of a real situation, perhaps the physical disintegration of salt by moisture that takes place when it is stored in the open. As he explains: “Since only about one-third of the salt from the Dead Sea consists of kitchen salt and even in commerce was not sold without admixtures, the moisture can affect the more easily dissolved parts of the salt mixture and detract from its taste.” Ben Witherington (on Mark 9:50) notes that salt mixed with gypsum when brought from the Dead Sea could go flat and become insipid (*The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001] 273). Cf. Jeremias, *Parables* 168–69; France, *Matthew* 174–75. Reference is frequently made to Pliny’s *Hist. Nat.* 3.31.34.

⁹⁸ Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 166. See also Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2d ed.; New York: Scribner’s, 1963) 168–69; idem, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971) 28.

⁹⁹ Black, *Aramaic Approach* 166.

¹⁰⁰ Latham provides a detailed discussion, *Symbolism* 197–202.

¹⁰¹ Gundry, *Matthew* 84; Don Garlington, “‘You Fool!’: Matthew 5:22,” *BBR* 20 (2010) 61–84. The same ground is covered in less detail by Betz, *Sermon on the Mount* 159; Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 197–98; Latham, *Symbolism* 196–202. Latham notes that Mathew is the only evangelist to use μωραίνω in other places than 5:13. Interestingly, Gundry does not link μωραίνω with the other “fool(ish)” passages in Matthew (*Matthew* 76).

shot of that investigation was that “fool” (ῥακά [ῥᾱḱᾱ] and μωρός) is tantamount to things such as “unbeliever” and “apostate.” To be a “fool” in this specific sense is to align oneself with values and goals that are antithetical to the kingdom of God and its ideals. Latham puts his finger on it: “The foolishness denounced by the Bible is not so much a lack of intelligence as the perversion of a will turned away from God.”¹⁰² Therefore, for the disciples to become “foolish (tasteless) salt” is for them to be as the foolish builder of 7:26, the blind fools (scribes and Pharisees) of 23:17, and the foolish girls of 25:2, 3, 8, none of whom will be among the “sheep” who inhabit the kingdom in its final phase (25:34–40). By contrast, authentic or “salty” disciples are the “wise” who hear and do his words (7:21, 24–25). If the loss of salt is foolishness, its retention must mean enduring wisdom. Jesus’ admonition, then, is a very serious one: it is a call to perseverance and discipleship in the only meaningful sense of the word. As is becoming more commonly recognized, in Matthew and the other Gospels, *the* gospel is following Jesus.¹⁰³ For this reason, to “become foolish” is a refusal to follow him to the end; it is the same as putting one’s hand to the plow and then looking back (Luke 9:62), an echo of Lot’s wife (Gen 19:26).¹⁰⁴ The tragic irony is that instead of salt symbolizing the disciples as the agents of salvation and blessing, it turns out to be an emblem of judgment upon *them*: *they* have become, as it were, “pillars of salt.” Latham rightly avers that the text has in mind the “salt of the covenant” as a sign of covenant fidelity. The converse, naturally, would be covenant infidelity.¹⁰⁵

The only thing that can be done with worthless salt is throw it out and let people trample on it.¹⁰⁶ As Luz puts it, “The logion’s importance is in its threat.” Luz then remarks that the expressions “to be thrown out” and “to be trampled underfoot” evoke associations of judgment.¹⁰⁷ At that point in history, the street was where refuse of various sorts was dumped and people would walk over it. Any substance subjected to that sort of treatment would naturally come to stand for reprobation and judgment.¹⁰⁸ To quote Betz, “Dull

¹⁰² Latham, *Symbolism* 198.

¹⁰³ Especially relevant are: Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 58–61, 101–16; Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in the Synoptic Gospels* (ETS Monograph Series 4; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006); Edmund K. Neufeld, “The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’ from the Synoptics,” *JETS* 51 (2008) 267–96; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 546–65; Donald A. Hagner, “Holiness and Ecclesiology: The Church in Matthew,” in *Built Upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (eds. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 170–86.

¹⁰⁴ Allison, *Intertextual Jesus* 78–81, 95–98; David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 316.

¹⁰⁵ Latham, *Symbolism* 208.

¹⁰⁶ Καταπατέω is associated with judgment in the winepress imagery of the LXX of Isa 10:6; 25:10; 63:3.

¹⁰⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1–7* 206. Luz further relates (*ibid.* 206, n. 34) that βάλλω appears in connection with judgment in Matt 3:10; 5:29; 7:19; 13:42, 48; 18–8–9; and ἐκβάλλω in 8:12; 22:13; 25:30. Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 198, n. 293, cites Jonah 1:12 (ἐμβάλετέ με εἰ” τὴν θάλασσαν). I might add that ἐκβάλλω is used in the LXX of Gen 3:24 of Adam’s expulsion from the Garden, as likely echoed by Mark 1:12.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. the similar language of casting out in Luke 13:28; John 6:37; 9:34, 35; 12:31; 15:6.

salt is nothing but dirt, and it is thus treated like dirt.”¹⁰⁹ Gundry captures the practical essence of salt discarded as garbage: “The last part of v 13 warns against failure to persevere in good works. Such failure will falsify a profession of discipleship and put one under an irrevocable sentence of judgment. The question of how spoiled salt can be made salty again ends in hopelessness.”¹¹⁰ Such is the impact of the rhetorical query, “with what will its saltiness be restored” (ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται)? The implied answer is that it cannot. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states the case powerfully. Regarding the salt that loses its taste, Bonhoeffer writes:

It just stops working. Then it is indeed good for nothing but to be thrown away. That is the peculiar quality of salt. Everything else needs to be seasoned with salt, but once the salt itself has lost its savor, it can never be salted again. Everything else can be saved by salt, however bad it has gone—only salt which loses its savor has no hope of recovery. That is the judgment which always hangs over the disciple community, whose mission is to save the world, but which, if it ceases to live up to that mission, is itself irretrievably lost.¹¹¹

Bonhoeffer’s phrasing gives us the commonsense import of salt “losing its taste.” Whether such a thing is literally possible or not, Jesus’ simple and obvious point is that useless salt is the type that “just stops working.”¹¹² Insipid disciples are those who have ceased to have any meaningful influence for good on the earth; they have ceased to be covenant-keepers and have become covenant-breakers.

2. Mark 9:49–50

For everyone will be salted with fire.¹¹³ Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

¹⁰⁹ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount* 159. Furthermore, “ordinary salt is indeed powerful, but dull salt has left only the power of self-destruction” (ibid.).

¹¹⁰ Gundry, *Matthew* 76. Craig S. Keener adds: “No true disciple could be merely nominal and remain a true disciple. . . . In this context Jesus challenges his disciples: tasteless salt lacks value, and so does a professed disciple who lacks genuine commitment” (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 173). Turner, *Matthew* 155, also calls to mind that the loss of saltiness symbolizes the sort of spiritual decline against which Jesus explicitly warns elsewhere (e.g. 7:26–27; 13:20–22; 24:10–12), and serves to reinforce the kingdom value of inner purity (5:8).

¹¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, repr. 1959) 116–17. Deines’s synthesis of exegetical data as they bear on the mission of the disciples is outstanding (*Gerechtigkeit* 207–17). Of particular interest is the parallel drawn between Jesus’ disciples and Noah, the “preacher of righteousness” (ibid. 211–13).

¹¹² Marcus (on Mark 9:50) comes to the same conclusion: “the scientific facts are beside the point; ‘unsalty salt’ is a striking figure for worthlessness” (*Mark 8–16* 693). Deatrick’s study of the composition of sodium chloride in ancient Palestine is interesting, but in the end not really necessary. His bottom line, however, is quite to the point. Referring to the disciples, he paraphrases: “If you become like the savorless salt, no longer good for anything, how will the gospel of the Kingdom be preached throughout the whole world” (“Salt, Soil, Savior” 48)?

¹¹³ There are several variant readings for 9:49. See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 295, n. 23. Edwards opts for “For everyone will be salted with fire” (πᾶς γὰρ πῦρ ἀλισθήσεται). Also, Latham, *Symbolism* 231–32.

Mark's variation on the salt-saying is part of an overall scenario having to do with judgment. It is in 9:30–32 that Jesus announces his impending rejection and death in Jerusalem. Thereupon follows the dispute among the disciples about who was the greatest (9:33–37),¹¹⁴ including the incident of the “outsider exorcist” (9:38–40), whose object lesson is that “whoever is not against us is for us.” The importance of the messengers of the kingdom is such that even a cup of cold water given them will result in reward (9:41), but anyone who causes these “little ones” to stumble will incur a terrible judgment (9:42). Then attention is turned to the disciples' own responsibility not to sin, presumably by their resistance of allurements that come from outside sources. Failure to discipline one's members (hands, feet, eyes) will bring upon one as severe a judgment, if not worse, as that meted out to those who would lead these little ones into courses of disobedience (9:43–48). At this point enters the pericope about the salt.

“For everyone will be salted with fire” states the reason for taking seriously the injunctions and warnings of 9:43–48 (as signaled by γάρ). With an oblique glance at the valley of Hinnom,¹¹⁵ the figure of salt is compared with that of fire.¹¹⁶ The gist of the comparison is well described by Robert Gundry: “fire will fall on everyone without exception, as when salt is sprinkled indiscriminately, in order that true believers might pass the test of fire . . . and apostates suffer the just-mentioned judgment of eternal fire and decay.”¹¹⁷ Adele Yarbro Collins agrees: each follower of Jesus will be tested by fire—what is worthless will be destroyed, and what is good will survive.¹¹⁸ It is open to question whether the judgment takes place here-and-now or in the eschaton. In all probability, it is both, given the “already and not yet” architecture of NT eschatology. The passive “will be salted” is probably the divine passive: God will do the salting by means of fire.

The origin of the unusual expression “salted with fire” (πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται) can be traced to the (covenantal) meaning of salt as judgment in the OT. Among the several examples, two particularly stand out. The one is Gen 19:24–26: “the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire. . . . But Lot's wife behind him looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” The other is Jer 17:6: “He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.” This verse is to be read in conjunction with Jer 17:4: “You shall loosen your hand from your heritage which I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land which you do not know, for in

¹¹⁴ On the question in all three Synoptics, see Don Garlington, “Who is the Greatest?” *JETS* 53 (2010) 287–316.

¹¹⁵ Among many sources, there are Witherington, *Mark*, 272–73; Urban C. von Wahlde, “Mark 9:33–50: Discipleship: The Authority that Serves,” *BZ* 29 (1985) 62–63.

¹¹⁶ Fire as an element of judgment is common enough in the Bible (e.g. Num 11:1–3; Deut 9:3; 32:22; Isa 1:25; 31:9; 66:24; Jer 15:14; Amos 7:4; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–3; 4:1 [Jdt 16:17]; Matt 3:11–12; 25:41; Luke 12:49–53; 1 Cor 3:13–16).

¹¹⁷ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 515. Gundry suggests that “salted with fire” comes close to “cast fire on the earth” (Luke 12:49), a like metaphor of judgment. As striking, “peace” follows closely in Luke 12:49, as it does in Mark 9:50.

¹¹⁸ Adele Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; New York: Doubleday, 2007) 454.

my anger a fire is kindled which shall burn forever.” As observed above, given the interplay of these two statements, “fire” and “salt” are analogous ways of depicting the same reality—the curse of the covenant owing to idolatry. Against this backdrop, “salted with fire” is tantamount to “judged with fire.”

The imagery of judgment by fire is capable of a twofold application. (1) For faithless followers, salting/judgment with fire means undergoing the curses of the covenant, in this case the new covenant, which is commensurate with onset of the eschatological kingdom.¹¹⁹ Disciples who fail to stay the course and fall short of the demands of this covenant (Gundry’s “apostates”) will be assessed by its standards and then cast out. Such is their salting with fire: it is as though they are Shechem suffocated with salt by Abimelech (Judg 9:45), or a fruitful land turned into a salty waste (Ps 107:34), or Moab left desolate and possessed by salt pits (Jer 48:9; Zeph 2:9).¹²⁰ (2) Faithful followers, also “salted with fire,” will undergo the same (eschatological) trial, but in their case the outcome is decidedly different. For them, the salting with fire is not their condemnation but their purification, paving the way for their entrance into the everlasting kingdom.¹²¹ For them, salt as a “type” of purity finds its fulfillment in the “antitype” of the fellowship of Christ’s steadfast messengers.¹²² Robert Stein, in this regard, is doubtless correct that in God’s permissive will experiences are allowed to occur that work for the believer’s ultimate good, including persecution.¹²³ In addition, William Lane evokes the OT obligation of adding salt to the offerings, with the application that the salt-sacrifice-metaphor is appropriate to a situation of suffering and trial, in which the principle of sacrifice is now severely tested. In his words: “The disciples must be seasoned with salt, like the sacrifice. This will take place through fiery trials . . . through which God will purge away everything contrary to his will.”¹²⁴ Both Edwards and France are in basic accord.¹²⁵ France in particular comments that salting with fire, in this context, “speaks of one who follows Jesus as totally dedicated

¹¹⁹ See Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom* 192–202. While the point cannot be developed here, the new covenant also introduces the new creation, because, in biblical theology, covenant and creation are correlated concepts. See William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984); Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and The Integrity of Creation* (Heythrop Monographs 7; London: Sheed & Ward, 1992); Bernard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

¹²⁰ See also Marcus, *Mark* 8–16 692. Marcus relates that in later literature the salt of Sodom may have been thought of as particularly fiery.

¹²¹ In this regard, Nauck is correct, “Salt as a Metaphor” 172–73.

¹²² See also Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34b; Nashville: Nelson, 2001) 73. Evans links the present passage to the baptism of Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16).

¹²³ Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 450. Ernest Best also plays up the factor of persecution, of which fire is a frequent image, e.g., 1 Pet 1:7; 4:12; Rev 3:18 (*Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* [JSNTSup 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981] 87).

¹²⁴ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 349. The purgative aspect of fire can be metaphor for the testing of confessing Christians (1 Pet 1:6–7). Cf. Latham, *Symbolism* 237–39.

¹²⁵ Edwards, *Mark* 296; France, *Mark* 384.

to God's service, and warns that such dedication will inevitably be costly in terms of personal suffering."¹²⁶

The two sides of the salting-with-fire process are drawn out aphoristically by 9:50a: "Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, with what will you season it?" Gundry points out that "good" (καλόν) forges a link with 9:42, 43, 45, 47, where the adjective also occurs. As in each of those verses, its forward position here is also emphatic.¹²⁷ Clearly enough, Jesus plays on the positive side of the salt-imagery of Scripture. He does not state specifically how it is that salt is good, but reasoning from the above data, it can be deduced that salt is good because it stands for: (1) permanence and covenant fidelity; (2) covenant (table) fellowship; (3) purity. In their own right, all three are pertinent enough, but in light of the concluding exhortation, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another," the factor of covenant fellowship takes on a special relevance (see below). Yet salt is "good" only as long as it retains its character as salt. If it becomes "tasteless" (ἀναλον γένηται), then "with what [how] will you season it?" Mark's wording corresponds to that of Matthew (ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ), except that the latter's verb (μωραίνω) ties into the "foolishness" motif of the First Gospel. But the difference is negligible, because in this immediate context Jesus warns against infidelity and a life characterized by sin. Also like Matthew ("How shall its saltiness be restored?"), there is a rhetorical question, "with what (ἐν τίνι) will you season it?" The implied answer is that "you cannot season it with anything"—the salt is good for nothing. This is why Best can write that salt makes a disciple, it is "that which distinguishes him from those who are not disciples; without this quality or flavour the disciple is ἄναλος."¹²⁸ As in Matthew, the disintegration of the salt means that the world suffers as a consequence: the gospel of the kingdom is not proclaimed, and this fallen creation remains in its sin and degradation. And matters are even worse, if Von Wahlde is right in connecting the loss of salt with the varying uses of σκάνδαλον in 9:41–48: saltless disciples are actually a stumbling block to others.¹²⁹

Here in Mark 9:49–50, like Matt 5:13, the genius of salt as both blessing and curse is on full display. In a nutshell, this process of trial, testing, and self-sacrifice will culminate in the ultimate salvation of the disciple in the Day of Christ, whereas the "worthless" will be consigned to the Gehenna of fire. The present passage, then, is another instance of the covenantal background of salt as it bears on Jesus' words. In spite of the reluctance of numerous commentators to attach a specific significance to his employment of the figure of salt, here and elsewhere, it is just its multidimensional nature that serves to unpack and apply his intentions.¹³⁰ What is intended as blessing, that is,

¹²⁶ France, *Mark* 384.

¹²⁷ Gundry, *Mark* 515.

¹²⁸ Best, *Following Jesus* 88. Also, Nauck, "Salt as a Metaphor" 176.

¹²⁹ Von Wahlde, "Discipleship" 64.

¹³⁰ The multifarious makeup of salt, however, does not justify such a reading as that of J. Duncan M. Derrett, who proposes that Mark has in mind salt as a curative and cauterizing agent, applied after the amputation of limbs, the point being that the leaders of the early church had to apply symbolic amputation (criticism) and then treat the "wounds" with the preserving salt of the com-

the mission of the disciples for the redemption and betterment of the world, can turn into a judgment on them, if they become "tasteless." The same Lord who commissioned them to be his ambassadors will, if they fall away, become their judge who salts them with fire. Lane, then, is on target in maintaining that the disciples have "an eschatological responsibility toward men in a world which is subject to the judgment of God." For this reason, Jesus warns his own against losing their salt-like quality, which is designed to be the life of the world. "Here," according to Lane, "salt typifies that quality which is the distinctive mark of the disciple, the loss of which will make him worthless." Lane, like Gundry, takes this "distinctive mark of the disciple" to be one's allegiance to Jesus and the gospel.¹³¹ Witherington, taking a rather traditional line, proposes that the disciples are meant to be the world's salt in the sense that they are "a preservative in the dying carcass of a world. If they lose their savor, the world truly stinks and dies."¹³² True enough, at least as far as it goes, but it is much more appropriate, theologically and practically, to move beyond the perseveration of a dying carcass and to think in terms of the resurrection of the dead to new life and fruitfulness, the restoration of God's "very good" creation. Nothing less than the attainment of this goal is the "eschatological responsibility" of the church.

In order to prevent the tragedy of a miscarried mission, the disciples are to have salt among themselves and be at peace with one another.¹³³ As suggested just above, "salt is good" for several biblical (covenantal) reasons, but the most appropriate category here is that of salt added to the sacrifices as a token of table fellowship. Harry Fleddermann concurs that the background here is the sharing of salt during a communal meal (Ezra 4:14). Accordingly,

To share salt with someone is to share fellowship with him, to be in covenant with him. The discourse began with two situations of conflict and strife, the self-seeking arguing of the disciples about rank and the conflict with the strange exorcists. It went on to discuss the problem of scandal in the community. To all this Mark opposes the peace of covenant fellowship.¹³⁴

For Jesus' followers to have salt "among themselves" (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς)¹³⁵ is for them to look to the community of believers as the source of friendship and fellowship,¹³⁶ not to the circle of those who would cause them to sin (9:42),

munity ("Salted with Fire: Studies in Texts: Mark 9:42–50," *Theology* 76 [1973]) 364–68). Derrett is criticized by Latham, *Symbolism* 233.

¹³¹ Lane, *Mark* 350.

¹³² Witherington, *Mark* 273. Likewise, Edwards, *Mark* 295.

¹³³ Latham (*Symbolism* 227) takes the καί of verse 50 to be the equivalent of ἵ and translates: "Have salt in yourselves and *thus* live in peace with one another."

¹³⁴ Harry Fleddermann, "The Discipleship Discourse (Mark 9:33–50)," *CBQ* 43 (1981) 73. In accord are Lattke, "Salz der Freundschaft," esp. 48–53, 55–56; Marcus, *Mark 8–16* 693 (with parallels from Philo); Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 201. *PGL* 79, documents patristic authors who understood salt as a token of friendship (cf. *LSJ* 73).

¹³⁵ Lattke, "Salz der Freundschaft" 54–55, notes that ἐν ἑαυτοῖς is equivalent to ἐν ἀλλήλοις.

¹³⁶ "To have salt . . . means to share salt as in peaceful fellowship at table" (Gundry, *Mark* 528). Henry Barclay Swete paraphrases 9:50 as: "Keep the seasoning power, the preserving sacrificial Fire, within your own hearts, and as a first condition and indication of its presence there, be at peace with your brethren" (*The Gospel According to Mark* [3d ed.; London: McMillan, 1913] 213).

resulting in the yielding of their members to unrighteousness (cf. Rom 6:13, 19).¹³⁷ The question, "with what will you season it," writes Gundry, "points up the impossibility of believers' finding peace outside their community and therefore the necessity of keeping the peace that is to be found within it. . . . Without peace within the community, hostility from without will lead believers to apostatize." Gundry then correctly contrasts peace in the community with the self-seeking ambition of the disciples to be the greatest in the kingdom (9:33–41): "To avoid causing sin, be at peace in your own circle, with him, and with all who make up the body politic of God's kingdom."¹³⁸

In its biblical setting, peace as a distinguishing trait of the assembly of the new age is virtually a given. Particularly in the prophets, *shalôm* is a feature of the new creation that is to attend Israel's return from exile (e.g. Isa 9:6–7; 32; 52:7; 57:19; Ezek 37:26; Hag 2:9; cf. Num 6:22–26).¹³⁹ In short, peace is a return to the paradise of the Garden of Eden, as procured by the work of the Messiah, the "Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6). It is nothing less than such peace and unity that the church is required to preserve (Eph 4:1–6). Without the maintenance of peace, the salt will inevitably lose its taste and power, with the consequence that there will be the salting with fire which is the destruction of the soul.

In rounding off this discussion of Mark 9:49–50, the question arises whether the salt-metaphor stands for wisdom, as per Nauck's contention that such is the case. In my view, the answer should be a qualified yes. As noted above, Mark's warning that the salt not become tasteless corresponds to Matthew's caveat that it not become "foolish." Since the opposite of "foolish" is "wise," it would follow that wisdom is a characteristic of genuine disciples. Nauck asks, What kind of wisdom is meant here? The answer is that it is not the intellectual σοφία of the Greeks: "It is, as often in Judaism, an active and practical wisdom, a knowledge that is worked out in acts. . . . It means the wisdom of the disciples of Jesus which is lived out, realized in their religious attitude, in their faith and in their conduct of life, keeping in mind the last events to come." Nauck then compares our passage with Matt 10:16 and Eph 5:15–17:

The wisdom which is required in both of these instructions for discipleship shows one how to conduct his life in the eschatological time. Perhaps now we can say that there is also an organic connection of thought between Mk. 9,49 and 50: the eschatological events should condition the life of Jesus' disciples. The wisdom which is required in both of these instructions for discipleship shows one how to conduct his life in the eschatological time.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Collins, *Mark* 455, writes to the same effect: "'Have salt within yourselves' in Mark may be read as a metaphor for protecting oneself against corruption, for avoiding the kinds of sins and occasions of sins treated in vv. 42–48. Only in this way can one avoid being consumed by the testing fire of v. 49 or eternally punished by the fire of vv. 43–48." Collins cites Ign. *Magn.* 10.2.

¹³⁸ Gundry *Mark*, 516. The same association is made by Witherington, *Mark* 274; Collins, *Mark* 455–56. Marcus, *Mark 8–16* 699, maintains that the exhortation to peace spills over into the pericope concerning marriage in 10:1–12.

¹³⁹ See further G. K. Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Galatians 6,16b," *Bib* 80 (1999) 204–23.

¹⁴⁰ Nauck, "Salt as a Metaphor" 176. This conclusion follows not from Nauck's assemblage of rabbinic texts (*ibid.* 168–70) but from a comparison of Mark with Matthew and Col 4:6 (below).

3. *Luke 14:34–35*

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the land nor for the dunghill; men throw it away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

In Luke, the salt pericope is placed in immediate conjunction to the summons to discipleship in 14:25–33 (as highlighted by οὖν), which itself is intended to fortify Jesus’ parables about the consequences of refusing the invitation to embrace the kingdom (vv. 7–24). Green can comment that while this saying on salt is not cast in the form of a parable, it is still parabolic in function.¹⁴¹ Like Mark 9:49, the statement that “salt is good” is aphoristic and has reference to the sort of discipleship that embraces the conditions set out in verses 25–33. No less dedication than this can be “good salt.” Also like the parallels in Matthew and Mark, the crucial factor is that the salt not lose its taste (ἐὰν δὲ καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ). That Luke employs μωραίνω is explicable from its presence in Matt 5:13, though the Third Gospel does not exhibit thematically the notion of foolishness. The impact of the salt becoming “foolish” is well said by Green: “[T]hose who attempt to journey with Jesus without a thoroughgoing commitment to God’s purpose, an allegiance to God that relativizes all other relationships and social values, are not worthy of the designation of ‘disciple’. . . . With his salt-metaphor, then, Jesus calls attention to the urgency of his instruction on the conditions of discipleship and bids his audience to respond.”¹⁴² John Nolland adds that in the Lukan flow of thought the salt that loses its flavor is the one who tries to embark on the project of discipleship without the necessary resources of disencumberment and cross. Unthinkingly, he is like the person who could not complete his tower and the king who went blindly into a battle that he could not win (vv. 28–32).¹⁴³

Even more graphically than in Matthew, the worthless salt for Luke is not even fit for the manure pile: it is simply “thrown out” (ἐξω βάλλουσιν αὐτό), presumably into the street. Yet there is a point of comparison, to which Latham calls attention, the presence of “out” (ἐξω). In both Gospels and in John, ἐξω means the place where rotten fish, pruned branches, and the prince of this world are cast.¹⁴⁴ Given that the dunghill itself was a place of notorious uncleanness, situated outside the city walls, it is impossible to conceive of a more scathing denunciation.¹⁴⁵ One might think that the dunghill was a fitting destination for insipid salt, but the language is rhetorical, even hyperbolic, intended to emphasize the worthlessness of such salt: it is not even good enough for that place of repulsion. Another Lucan distinctive is the call to pay attention to this saying: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” “From each one of those listening to Jesus in the crowds (v. 25) the comment calls

¹⁴¹ Green, *Luke* 567.

¹⁴² Ibid. 568.

¹⁴³ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35b; Dallas: Word, 1993) 765.

¹⁴⁴ Latham, *Symbolism* 208–9, 217. Latham compares ἐξω with several of Paul’s letters (1 Cor 5:12; Col 4:5; 1 Thess 4:11), in which “outside” indicates the situation of those who are not part of the community (ibid. 218).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Wood, “Salt of the Earth” 168.

for a positive decision.”¹⁴⁶ That decision is for perseverance in one’s vocation as a disciple.¹⁴⁷

4. *Acts 1:4*

And when he shared salt with them, he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me.”

In the interim between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, Luke relates that he ate a meal with the disciples and then charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but instead to wait for the promise of the Father. According to Ben Witherington, Luke wants to stress that the resurrected Jesus was no mere spirit, but was tangible and could eat and drink with the disciples. The resurrection appearances were not just visions from heaven but happenings on earth.¹⁴⁸ Our particular concern is with the meal itself. Certain translations obscure the intention of the participle of the first clause of this verse (συναλιζόμενος), which, I would propose, is best understood as “eating salt together,” that is, at a meal. The meaning is attested by BDAG (964) and supported by C. K. Barrett, who links “eating salt together” with Luke’s resurrection narratives (Luke 24:30, 31, 35, 41–43).¹⁴⁹ In accord are F. F. Bruce,¹⁵⁰ Ernst Haenchen,¹⁵¹ Howard Marshall,¹⁵² and Richard Pervo.¹⁵³ After a thorough discussion of the verse’s philological problems, Max Wilcox basically leaves its exact meaning an open question. However, Wilcox leans towards the option that Luke’s Greek reflects the rare Hebrew verb לָחַם, to signify Jesus’ “very

¹⁴⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB 28a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1070.

¹⁴⁷ See Latham, *Symbolism* 219–20.

¹⁴⁸ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 109.

¹⁴⁹ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, 1998) 1.71. There is also a connection with the passion in Luke via the Last Supper. David P. Moessner demonstrates that the “way” motif of Luke (9:51–19:44) contains a significant number of references to Jesus and the disciples eating and drinking along the road to Jerusalem. All these instances serve to anticipate the Supper, which itself is presages the end-time feast in the kingdom to come. “Jesus,” says Moessner, “is the host of a Passover-Passion meal that climaxes all of his eating and drinking during the journey.” It is as the suffering and rejected one that Jesus hosts the anticipatory meal of the consummate kingdom of God. By his suffering, “Jesus is the Mosaic Servant whose vicarious death establishes the new covenant in which the apostles will eat and drink and judge the tribes of Israel” (*Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989] 181–82).

¹⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 101.

¹⁵¹ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 141, n. 3.

¹⁵² I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980) 58.

¹⁵³ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 37. Pervo relates that the translation “eat with” follows Lukan convention, especially as connected with the meal scene of Luke 22:7–30.

special type of [table] fellowship He was then enjoying with his disciples."¹⁵⁴ However, not everyone is on-board with the consensus.¹⁵⁵

Notwithstanding the semantic difficulties of Acts 1:4, including the textual variants,¹⁵⁶ on the biblical-theological level Latham proposes that the reference is to salt as a sign of table fellowship. Combined with Luke 13:26; 22:30; 24:35; Acts 2:42, 46; 10:41, such meals gave expression to an intimate fellowship wherein the Lord and his disciples are brought into communion: "Partaking of salt was one way to indicate this special union of friends, second only to 'the breaking of bread'."¹⁵⁷ Such a take on Jesus' last recorded meal with the disciples follows naturally enough from salt as a symbol of covenant or table fellowship in the OT. The exact relation of this repast to the Lord's Supper is not altogether certain, but conceptually it is not farfetched to think that the Supper was a species of covenant fellowship, whether salt was physically present or not.¹⁵⁸ Also, it is not beyond the pale to deduce that the Christian communal meal is an instrument of strengthening ("resalting") those who are the salt of the earth. Traditionally, the Supper has been regarded as a "means of grace," and the particular grace imparted by the occasion is that of intimate communion with Christ and his people, to the end that the salt not become "tasteless." The fellowship of the Supper, in conjunction with all occasions of assembly, are but the extension and application of Jesus' encouragement for believers to "have salt among themselves" (Mark 9:50), by looking to the community as the source of their "peace."

5. *Colossians 4:6*

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one.

Paul's injunction regarding the Christian's speech patterns comes toward the end of the paraenetic section of the Colossian letter. In particular, the apostle is concerned that his readers renounce the old ways of thinking and

¹⁵⁴ Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) 106–9 (quotation from p. 109). Marshall also writes that συναλιζομαι is unusual and appears to pertain to this special kind of fellowship (*Acts*, 58).

¹⁵⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer thinks that the translation "eat salt together" is ill suited to this context (*The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998] 203). However, I would retort that the rendering is precisely in line with the context, because Acts 1:4 relates Jesus' final time of fellowship with his own before the ascension, especially in conjunction with the pattern of meals in Luke/Acts and Luke's resurrection narratives.

¹⁵⁶ Bruce M. Metzger defends the UBS reading of συναλιζόμενοι, though he acknowledges that this meaning is extremely rare in Greek literature and does not turn up before the end of the second century AD (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [2d ed.; Stuttgart/New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 241–42).

¹⁵⁷ Latham, *Symbolism* 58. On the motif of table fellowship in Luke, see throughout Moessner's *Lord of the Banquet*.

¹⁵⁸ Joachim Jeremias reflects that the Last Supper was not an isolated event, but must be seen as one of a long series of daily meals shared by Jesus and the Twelve. He writes: "For the oriental every table fellowship is a guarantee of peace, of trust, of brotherhood. Table fellowship is a fellowship of life. Table fellowship with Jesus is more" (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* [2d ed.; London: SCM, 1973] 204). The gathering of Acts 1:4, Jesus' last earthly meal, is also integrally connected with his table fellowship with the disciples as a whole.

living and comport themselves as those who have been raised with Christ (3:1–3). In addition to their intramural relationships, believers are to conduct themselves wisely toward outsiders (4:5).¹⁵⁹ James Dunn's comment on the verse is well worth heeding. This final exhortation of the letter "explicitly envisages a church in communication with those around it, not cut off in a 'holy huddle' speaking only 'the language of Zion' to insiders, and in such a way as to allow plenty [of] opportunity to bear testimony to their faith."¹⁶⁰ In so communicating, they are to be particularly sensitive to the manner in which they speak their minds.

The believer's speech, literally "word" (ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν), is always to be ἐν χάριτι. The translation of this Greek phrase as "gracious" is the most likely one. BDAG (1079) render: "let your conversation always be winsome."¹⁶¹ It is in these terms that one's speech is to be "seasoned with salt" (ἁλατι ἡρτυμένος). A number of commentators take "seasoned with salt" in the sense of talk that is "spicy," that is, witty, lively, and interesting, to the end that the gospel be promoted and defended capably.¹⁶² Such a facility, of course, is highly desirable and useful, but to make this kind demand on the rank-and-file of Christians goes beyond the pale of reality and places an onus on numerous individuals who are simply incapable of such scintillating conversation. After all, Paul is addressing each of his readers, not just the teachers and orators. Rather than looking to Greco-Roman sources as the origin of Paul's "seasoned with salt," I would propose that it is much more to the point to recast our eye over the OT texts. In so doing, it is Lightfoot's "secondary application" of salt as a preservative from corruption that should assigned the primary status.¹⁶³ The actual phrase "seasoned with salt" occurs in the MT of Exod 30:35 (רוקח ממלח). As we saw, in the Hebrew of this verse "seasoned with salt" stands in apposition to "pure and holy." By way of comparison and deduction, then, speech seasoned with salt is pure and holy; the salt keeps one's words from becoming corrupted or rotten and thus off-putting to any listeners.

Consequently, the most appropriate parallels to the present verse are from the Bible itself. The words that proceed from a Christian's mouth are his sacrifice to the Lord (cf. Rom 12:1), "pure and holy." A discourse that is "seasoned with salt is" to the end that one may know how to answer everyone (εἰδέναι

¹⁵⁹ Literally, "walk in wisdom" (ἐν σοφίᾳ περιπατεῖτε).

¹⁶⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 266.

¹⁶¹ Also, J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: McMillan, 1879) 232.

¹⁶² Dunn, *Colossians* 266–67; Lightfoot, *Colossians* 232–33 (though Lightfoot allows for preservation from corruption as a secondary application); C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957) 135; N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 153; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 175; Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 168–69; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972) 138–39; David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 274.

¹⁶³ Lightfoot, *Colossians* 232.

πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς ἐνὶ ἐκάστῳ ἀποκρίνεσθαι). Among the commentators, Eduard Schweizer is the one who grasps Paul's point. The apostle's outlook is not purely rhetorical, in which eloquence is something worth striving for simply its own sake. Rather, his main interest is the missionary responsibility concerning questions raised by those who are outside the community: “This objective becomes more and more important at a time when the community of Jesus, although not actually persecuted, is living in the midst of a population that thinks differently and by which the community is called into question.”¹⁶⁴ For this vital reason, it is absolutely necessary for Christians to guard their tongues against impure (“soiled”) and unguarded speech of any variety, and then with words “seasoned with salt” to respond to all inquirers with such words that will be the means of grace to all who are prepared to hear.

Confirmation is to be had from Paul's own parallel of Eph 4:29: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.” Two points of comparison strike the eye immediately. One is the impartation of “grace” to the hearer. In view of verses 31–32, grace assumes the specific import of forgiveness, patterned after the divine example (“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”). The other is the “rotten speech” (λόγος σαπρός) that must not emanate from the mouth. BDAG (913) relate that σαπρός is used of plants and trees that have gone bad (Matt 7:17–19; 12:33; Luke 6:43–45 [paralleled by πονηρός in v. 45]), or fish (Matt 13:48).¹⁶⁵ As applied to human language, one's talk can be σαπρόν to the extent that it is harmful, evil, and unwholesome.¹⁶⁶ Paul's choice of words makes perfect sense, given that the salt of the sacrifice was intended to prevent it from putrefying into rot. Therefore, in both Col 4:6 and Eph 4:29, speech seasoned with salt is tempered and restrained. Our talk is not to be brash, rude, aggressive, and self-defensive, as we might be tempted to lash out against others in attempting to vindicate ourselves, and in so doing perhaps repel would-be listeners to the gospel. The direct antithesis of the λόγος σαπρός is “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). Other closely related parallels are 1 Pet 2:22–23; 3:8–9, 15–16.

¹⁶⁴ Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1982) 234. Schweizer adds that the real issue is for Christians to be prepared to face anyone who asks about Christ. Schweizer's take on the passage is buttressed by Deines, *Gerechtigkeit* 205–7. Cf. Collins, *Mark* 455.

¹⁶⁵ Commentators such as Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1998) 456, and Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990) 305, deny that σαπρός bears the particular connotation of “rotten” here and take the word in more general terms, such as “evil,” etc. But when read in connection with Col 4:6, with its own sacrificial associations, “rotten” provide a suitable contrast to the “pure and holy” salted speech expected of believers.

¹⁶⁶ Peter T. O'Brien writes to similar effect, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 344–45. The λόγος σαπρός covers any speech that is harmful or unwholesome, whether it be abusive language, vulgar speech, or slander and contemptuous talk. “Lips given to this kind of utterance not only defile the speaker (Matt. 15:11) but are also destructive of communal life” (ibid. 345).

The question arises whether speech “seasoned with salt” in Col 4:6 is tantamount to “wise speech.” My answer is yes, not because of the rabbinic texts forwarded by Nauck, which are post-Pauline and not so relevant.¹⁶⁷ Instead, the connection with wisdom follows from two sources. One is the immediately preceding verse. According to 4:5, “Conduct yourselves wisely (ἐν σοφίᾳ) toward outsiders.” The other is the identity of the disciples as “the salt of the earth,” those committed to Christ and the kingdom and who, therefore, do not “become foolish” in the sense intended by Matt 5:13. It is such followers who can communicate graciously to others by their sagacious choice of words. It is also suggestive to recall Lane’s insight into the OT requirement of adding salt to the offerings. As a figure applied to a situation of suffering and trial, the principle of sacrifice is severely tested. “The disciples must be seasoned with salt, like the sacrifice. This will take place through fiery trials . . . through which God will purge away everything contrary to his will.”¹⁶⁸

III. SUMMARY

This study has argued that the “the salt of the earth,” as predicated of Jesus’ disciples, should be understood within a covenantal framework. Like any word of theological significance, salt is a covenant term, meaning that its covenantal association is not merely a nuance; it is *the* determining component of interpretation. In advancing the argument, the underlying assumptions were threefold: the unity of Scripture, the validity of biblical theology, and the factor of intertextuality. After an exegesis of the relevant OT texts, conclusions were drawn respecting their bearing on Matt 5:13 and parallels. These boiled down to four. (1) As “salt,” the disciples exhibit covenant fidelity and so preserve the continuance of the covenant. This category includes the probability that Jesus’ followers are conceived of as sacrifices in their own persons. (2) By virtue of their identification as salt, the disciples share in covenant fellowship, including that of the table, and thus form a society in communion with the covenant Lord. (3) The disciples impart purity to the creation, thereby causing it to be better than before—a new creation. (4) There is the punitive function of salt. If the world rejects the message of the disciples, their witness to the blessings of salvation turns into a condemnation of it. Apart from these four basic applications of salt to the passages in question, in Matt 5:13 and Col 4:6 salt takes on hues of wisdom, due to contextual considerations. When Scripture itself is allowed to be the determining hermeneutical factor, a consistent picture emerges: Jesus’ genuine followers are covenant keepers; it is they who extend the bond with their Lord beyond themselves to the world. It is in so being and doing that they are the instruments of the lifting of the curse on the world and of its eschatological redemption and perfection. Their presence in the age to come will ensure the everlasting purity of the earth and the entire cosmos. Yet there is an ominous word of warning directed at would-be disciples: if they prove false, they will incur the curse of the salt that is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁶⁷ Nauck, “Salt as a Metaphor” 178.

¹⁶⁸ Lane, *Mark* 349 (drawing on Hauck, *TDNT* 1.229).