

What is a "covenant of salt"?

A covenant of salt in the Bible

The term **covenant of salt** is found **three** times in the Old Testament:

First occurrence

Leviticus 2:13 'And every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the **salt of the covenant** of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall **offer salt**.' [NKJV]

Notice here that the offerings were to be seasoned with salt, which is identified as the salt of the covenant.

Second occurrence

Numbers 18:19 "All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the LORD, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an ordinance forever; it is a **covenant of salt** forever before the LORD with you and your descendants with you." [NKJV]

This verse is in reference to establishment of the Aaronic Priesthood.

Third occurrence

2 Chronicles 13:5 "Should you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by **a covenant of salt?**"

This verse is in reference to the establishment of Davidic dynasty.

What does it mean?

One commentator notes that the origin of the phraseology is *unknown*¹, however many reliable sources believe the relevance lies in the **functions** of **salt** in a **covenant meal**.

For example we read:

Covenant of Salt

Biblical phrase for a two-way agreement, the inviolability of which was symbolized by salt. A Middle Eastern saying, "There is bread and salt between us," meant that a relationship had been confirmed by sharing a meal. Salt symbolized the life and enduring nature of the alliance. In the OT salt appears in the relationship between God and Israel (Lv 2:13). As a **purifying** agent and **preservative** in the cereal offering, salt symbolized the indissoluble nature of the **covenant** between **God and Israel**.

[Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In Baker encyclopaedia of the Bible (p. 538). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.]

Covenant of salt

As **salt** was regarded as a *necessary ingredient* of the daily food, and so of all sacrifices offered to **Yahweh** (Lev 2:13), it became an easy step to the very close connection **between salt and covenant-making**. When men ate together they became friends. Cf. the Arabic expressions, "*There is salt between us*"; "*He has eaten of my salt*," which means partaking of hospitality which cemented friendship; cf. "*eat the salt of the palace*" (Ezra 4:14). Covenants were generally **confirmed** by sacrificial meals and **salt** was always present. Since, too, **salt** is a preservative, it would easily become **symbolic of an enduring covenant**. So offerings to **Yahweh** were to be by a **statute forever**, "*a covenant of salt for ever before the Lord*" (Num 18:19). **David received his kingdom for-ever from the Lord by a "covenant of salt" (2 Chron 13:5)**. In the light of these conceptions the remark of Our Lord becomes the more significant: "**Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another**" (Mark 9:49-50) [from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, revised edition, Copyright © 1979 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.]

Others have suggested that: RE: ISRAEL

The term "**covenant of salt**" is indicative of the **everlasting nature** of the relationship between the **children of salt**, and their Elohim Yahweh. When we hear the term **salt**, the understanding is that the things Yahweh addresses are **eternal, enduring, never changing, and abiding forever**. All salt covenants then are eternal, and eternally binding on the sons and daughters of Yisrael, regardless where they are to be found, and regardless of whether a physical temple stands on Mt. Moriyah or not. [\[source\]](#)

THE WRITER SAYS

I am not convinced the term can be **limited** to that because:

- 1) The covenants that **God** makes with **man** are **perpetual**, see for example **Gen 17:7, 2 Sam 23:5** so it seems redundant to use **salt** to specify the **perpetual** nature of the covenant.
- 2) The **salt of the covenant** was used to season **all** the sacrifices, **many of which were eaten by the priests and those offering them**. The priest ate of the **grain** offering, the **peace** offering, the **sin** offering and the **trespass** offering, and the **peace offering** was eaten by those offering it as well².

The people participated in the sacrifices by the **eating** of them as well as the **offering** of them, and those sacrifices were in favour of the emphasis provided by the Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible and the Standard Bible Encyclopaedia mentioned above, as one commentator notes, "*It is a common phrase among Oriental people, who consider the eating of salt a **pledge of fidelity**, binding them in a covenant of friendship.*"³

Other thoughts ...

The phrase doesn't just emphasise the **perpetual** nature of the covenant but also the **friendly nature** of it as well.

"Faith is ... the certainty of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1)

"Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other" (Mark 9:49-50).

The passage found in *Mark 9* regarding **Christ's** words about **salt** is usually explained or expounded by simple reference to the fact that **biblically salt was a symbol of preservation or purity**, but if we look closely, these verses actually vary the **significance** of **salt** by stressing different meanings.

In Mark 9:49 the words *"Everyone will be salted with fire"* clearly refers to **purification**, but when we move to verse 50a the statement *"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?"* just as clearly refers to the disciple's commission to serve as **"salt"** of this world (Matthew 5:13) – a function of making the world *palatable* to God.

But in the final statement using salt as a symbol: *"Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other" (Mark 9:50b)*, neither of these previous meanings fits the saying. *"Have salt among yourselves"* does not make sense in terms of **purification** or making the world *palatable* – how would either meaning relate to being at **peace** with one another?

It is most likely that in the latter part of verse 50 Jesus' comment refers to the fact that in ancient Judea and in the wider ancient Near East, **salt** was used extensively in making covenants and treaties between individuals or groups. We see this in biblical verses such as:

Numbers 8:19: "Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord I give to you and your sons and daughters as your perpetual share. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord for both you and your offspring."

2 Chronicles 13:5: "Don't you know that the Lord, the God of Israel, has given the

kingship of Israel to David and his descendants forever by a covenant of salt?”

Leviticus 2:13: “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings.” This last verse is usually said to be based on the purificatory aspect of salt, but the text says specifically the salt is the “*salt of the covenant.*”

To “*eat salt together*” meant to *make peace* and *enter into a covenant* – or what we call today a “*peace treaty*” with someone. In Acts 1:4, where Jesus met with the disciples after his resurrection, most translations say he was “*with*” the disciples, but the Greek is literally “*being together salted*” – perhaps especially significant after the disciples had only recently deserted and disowned him.

Now, going back to *Mark 9:50*, the context of **Jesus**’ words in that verse is clear. The disciples were arguing about who among them would be the greatest, and **Jesus** had to rebuke them for this attitude (Mark 9:33-35). But his words recorded at the end of the chapter spoke to *the lack of peace between the disciples caused by this* – and doubtless other – arguments. In telling the disciples to “*have salt among yourselves and be at peace with each other*” (vs. 50), Jesus was probably urging them to use the ***symbolic salt of covenant relationship – specifically of a covenant of peace – and thus to be at peace with one another.***

We do not always know when the writers of the Gospels bring together related sayings that may have been spoken at different times, but which share a common theme. That could be the case in Mark 9 where we see different uses of the *symbolism of salt*, but it is also possible that **Jesus** simply varied the meanings of the *symbol* as he occasionally did in other instances. In either case, the reference to having “*salt among yourselves*” seems to be clearly related to the role of **salt** in covenants and treaties of peace.

RESOURCES

HHMI Newsgroup Archives

<https://www.hebroots.org/hebrootsarchive/0209/0209b.html>

What Does "Have Salt among Yourselves" Mean?

<http://www.livingwithfaith.org/blog/what-does-have-salt-among-yourselves-mean>

What Is a "Covenant of Salt"?

<https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/17232/what-is-a-covenant-of-salt>