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THE SALT *of the* Covenant



THE SALT of the Covenant



www.israelimages.com/Cathy Raff

the elements
of a *Shabbat* meal:

the wine
symbolizing joy

challah
(braided bread)
symbolizing the double
provision of manna

the lighting
of the candles
to remember and observe
the *Sabbath*



Every Friday night, I enjoy a *Shabbat* (Sabbath) meal with Jewish friends in my neighborhood. It is the highlight of my week. When I first experienced a *Shabbat* meal, while in America, I learned about the symbolism of each part of the meal: the two candles, symbolic of the commands to both remember (Exod. 20:8) and observe (Deut. 5:12) the *Shabbat*; the wine, the joy of *Shabbat*; the two loaves of *challah* (*Shabbat* braided bread) reminded Jews of God's double provision of manna in the wilderness on *Shabbat* (Exod. 16:22); the table, a picture of the Temple's altar; and the father officiating as the priest of the home.

The *Shabbat* service is actually a reminder to the Jewish people of the worship of Temple times. Because they haven't had a Temple since the last one was destroyed in AD 70, both the *Shabbat* table service and the synagogue service have elements that remind them of

those times and their desire to see another Temple built in their day.

Since living in Israel, I have learned more about the symbolism of the *Shabbat* table that directly relates to Temple worship: candle lighting, remembrance of the lighting of the Temple menorah; the wine, remembrance of the wine libations of Temple times; the *challah*, the 12 loaves of bread on the Temple's Table of Shewbread; the blessings over wife and children, reminiscent of the priests of old, who would bless the people after offering incense in the Holy Place with the priestly blessing (Num. 6:24–26); and the beautiful songs at the table both before and after the meal echo the singing of the Levites.

It is a beautiful service, but Christians might wonder how it can relate to them. It has taught me a different style of worship, the worship of Bible times. It was the way God taught the people to worship Him in ancient times. But is it really that different from worship today? Granted, Messiah—whom Christians worship today—had not yet been revealed, but Old Testament worship was God-instructed worship, so surely there's much we can glean from it that is relevant for us today.

Of course, two of the *Shabbat* elements—the bread and wine—are found in what the Church calls the Lord's Supper, which was a Passover meal. I find that each element on the *Shabbat* table has great meaning. Many are pre-New Testament pictures of Messiah, containing messages from God to His people concerning His covenant with them, one of which is the "covenant of salt."

Why Salt?

One part of the *Shabbat* table service I'd never fully understood was the salting of the *challah*. Just before the blessing is said over the bread, the father reaches for the salt and sprinkles salt over the two loaves. I'd been told it reminded Jews that all the offerings of Temple times were salted. The command is found in Leviticus 2:13: "...with all your offerings you shall offer salt."

"...with all
your offerings
you shall
offer salt."

LEVITICUS 2:13



But one night, I asked the question: Why salt? What was the significance of salt? No one had an immediate answer. It was interesting that an article in *The Jerusalem Post* the following week addressed the subject. It gave biblical references and sent me on a search. Besides learning the spiritual significance of salt, I wanted to know more about its qualities and its history because I knew that salt was a much rarer commodity in the ancient world than in ours. Therefore, it was much more valued. We need to get a good grasp of this

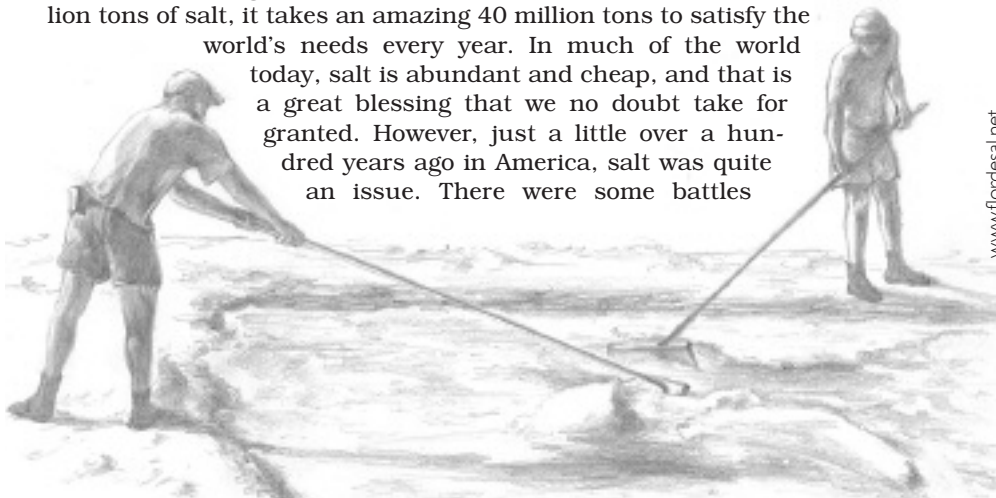
before we can fully understand the significance of its use in the Bible. Just type in the word "salt" into Google on the Internet, and one of the first sites listed is the Salt Institute. What a volume of information I found there, as well as several other sites.

The Properties and History of Salt

We all appreciate salt as a flavor enhancer. Even Job acknowledged this: "*Can something tasteless be eaten without salt?*" (6:6). Before refrigeration, it was most valuable as a preservative, as a salt brine has the ability to dehydrate bacterial cells, inhibiting bacterial growth, thus preventing food from spoiling. Salt draws the blood and moisture out of fresh meat, drying and preserving it. It was even used in the mummifying process in Egypt.

But there are a lot of other things salt does that most of us don't realize. It helps give bread dough a uniform texture, processed meats a firmer texture, and gives an even consistency in cheese and other foods. In the making of baked goods, pickles, cheese, sauerkraut, and summer sausage, salt controls the fermentation process. It also is a color enhancer, useful in making many processed meats appealing. It is salt that helps make your bread bake to a lovely golden color. As you can imagine, we would have a hard time living without salt.

Even though the oceans of the world contain 50 million billion tons of salt, it takes an amazing 40 million tons to satisfy the world's needs every year. In much of the world today, salt is abundant and cheap, and that is a great blessing that we no doubt take for granted. However, just a little over a hundred years ago in America, salt was quite an issue. There were some battles



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salt formations
on the Dead Sea



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"Can
something
tasteless
be eaten
without
salt?"

JOB 6:6



the Industrial Revolution brought about mass production of salt

Leonardo da Vinci
"The Last Supper"



In the Middle Ages, there was a superstition that if salt was spilt, there would be evil consequences.

during the Civil War where part of the North's strategy was to cut off the salt supply to the South. In 1865, salt cost a dollar a pound (454 gms)! Some countries, like Japan, don't have any salt deposits. For most of the ancient world, salt was rare and very costly. Countries without salt had to import it, and salt tax was prevalent. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, acknowledged that there was such a tax in his day. Did you know that more wars have been fought over salt than over gold? It wasn't until the Industrial Revolution, which introduced mass production, that such battles over salt came to an end.

Probably because of its biblical significance, some Greeks thought it divine. Plato called it a "substance dear to the gods." In the Middle Ages, there was a superstition that if salt was spilt, there would be evil consequences. It's interesting that the 15th-century Italian painter Leonardo da Vinci included an overturned salt container by Judas's arm in his famous Last Supper painting. Was he interpreting Scripture because of similar superstitions of his day or was he suggesting there were such superstitions in Yeshua's day? Maybe the artist used it as a symbol of a covenant of friendship that was being broken.

In ancient days, salt was used as payment. Ezra 4:14 refers to this, using an idiom we don't relate to in our day: "Now because we are in the service of the palace..." The word "service" is sometimes translated "maintenance," but a literal translation would be, "Now because we eat the salt of the palace," meaning the king provided their salary. It could be it just refers to their dependence on the king or that he actually paid them with salt. The Latin word for a Roman's salt ration is where we get our word "salary." Slaves were exchanged for salt, from which came the expression that someone is "not worth his salt."

In the days of Yeshua and Second Temple times, King Herod held a monopoly on salt coming from the Dead Sea, which supplied the priests with the salt needed for Temple ritual. Earlier, in Ezra's time, it was the king of Persia who supplied the salt (Ezra 7:21-22). The worshipper, in fact, was not required to supply the salt for the sacrifices. Salt, as well as wood and oil, were provided by the Temple and kept in special chambers on the Temple compound. Other cultures of the time used salt in their religious rituals as well...and still do.

In my search on salt through the Internet, I came across an article a Japanese man wrote, showing the similarities between some Japanese traditions and Jewish traditions. Here are some fascinating facts concerning salt in both cultures (my comments in brackets):

We Japanese have the custom to use salt for sanctification. People sometimes sow the Samurai: a woman threw salt on the place where a man she hated left. This custom is the same as that of the ancient Israelites. After Abimelech captured an enemy city, "he sowed it with salt" (Judges 9:45). We Japanese quickly interpret this to mean to cleanse and sanctify the city. [Josephus mentions such a thing also: "and when he had overthrown the city to the very foundations, for it was not able to bear a siege, and had sown its ruins with salt, he proceeded on with his army" (Antiquities, V, 7). Rather than sanctifying the ground, some say it was used as a means to curse the ground of the enemy and make it unproductive.]



I hear that when Jews move to a new house, they sow it with salt to sanctify it and cleanse it. This is true also in Japan. In Japanese-style restaurants, they usually place salt near the entrance. [In 18th-century Scotland, Scots would carry a salt box into a new house!] Jews use salt for Kosher meat. [Salt draws the blood from the meat. It's done in accordance with God's command not to eat blood (Lev. 17:10–12).] All Kosher meat is purified with salt and all meals start with bread and salt.

Japanese people place salt at the entrance of a funeral home. After coming back from a funeral, one has to sprinkle salt on oneself before entering his/her house. It is believed in Shinto that anyone who went to a funeral or touched a dead body had become unclean. Again, this is the same concept as was observed by the ancient Israelites [Lev. 22:4–6].



Japanese “sumo” wrestlers sow the sumo ring with salt before they fight. European or American people wonder why they sow salt. But Rabbi Tokayer wrote that Jews quickly understand its meaning. [Sumo is part of the Shinto religion, meant to entertain the gods. The ring is considered sacred and is purified with a salt ceremony, believed to cleanse the ring of bad spirit and fortune.]

Japanese people offer salt every time they perform a religious offering. This is the same custom used by the Israelites: “With all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Lev. 2:13).

Japanese people in old times had the custom of putting some salt into their baby's first bath. The ancient Israelites washed a newborn baby with water after rubbing the baby softly with salt (Ezek. 16:4). Sanctification and cleansing with salt and/or water is a common custom among both the Japanese and the ancient Israelites. [Elisha used salt to purify a city's water supply (2 Kings 2:19–22).]

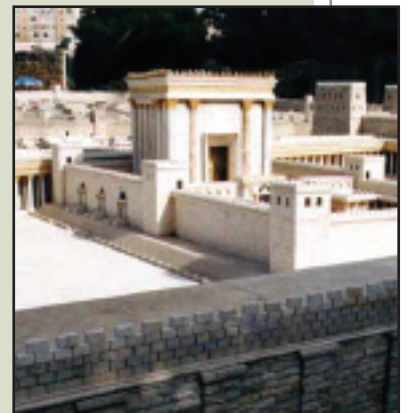
All this “trivia” about salt is to help us look at salt in a different light, with more appreciation, to point out that the people of past centuries, and even in more recent history, did not look at salt like we do today. It was not common, and it was not cheap. It was a precious commodity, very valuable, and, to some, even held mystical, spiritual meaning...just as it did to God.

Old Testament References to Salt

While the material above mentioned some biblical references, let's go back to where we began with God's command to salt every offering in Leviticus 2:13. There are only 41 references to salt in the biblical text. This one is the third. The first (Gen.14:3) refers to the Dead Sea, and the second (Gen. 19:26) is about Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt. I only quoted part of Leviticus 2:13 previously, but the rest of it tells us more about God's use of salt. “Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt.”

“...so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking....”

Leviticus 2:13





"The partaking in common of salt by those seated together at table was an ancient symbol of friendship and alliance."



God made an everlasting covenant with King David.

2 Samuel 7:16

Here we see that salt represented a covenant with God. One Bible commentator states, "The partaking in common of salt by those seated together at table was an ancient symbol of friendship and alliance." This is true in Arab culture as well, as they have an expression "there is salt between us" to refer to a contract made between two parties. Christian commentator Matthew Henry says, "Among the ancients, salt was a symbol of friendship."

Several commentators point out that the "salt of the covenant" mentioned in Leviticus 2:13 follows the prohibition of using leaven and honey (vs. 11). Both honey and leaven cause "corruption" or fermentation. Salt did not, but purified and preserved, or was "incorruptible." Was this not a good symbol for God's covenant with His people? Author and commentator Gordon Wenham makes this observation: "Salt was something

that could not be destroyed by fire or time or any other means in antiquity...This meant that God would never forsake him, and also that the worshipper had a perpetual duty to uphold and keep the covenant law."

Another reference to this covenant is in Numbers 18:19: "*All of the offerings of the holy gifts, which the sons of Israel offer to the LORD, I have given to you and your sons and your daughters with you, as a perpetual allotment. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD to you and your descendants with you.*" Here we see an additional emphasis, that of the "everlasting" or "perpetual." This means that the covenant of salt is still effective today. Sometimes we forget all the promises God makes in the Old Testament with His people of faith that include the word "everlasting." We tend to think that when Yeshua came, everything changed and that everything in God's "law" passed away. No, not everything; everlasting is everlasting, and forever means forever. Whatever theologies we may have developed need to save room for these Old Testament "forevers." Gentile Christians may not use salt today to symbolize anything spiritual, but Jews do—every *Shabbat*—in remembrance of God's everlasting covenant. "Everlasting" is a word that describes God's faithfulness to keep His promises, even if His people are unfaithful. Aren't we all glad that His love for us is indestructible?

The next and last place the term "covenant of salt" is used is in 2 Chronicles 13:5. In the days after Solomon when Israel was divided into the two kingdoms, Abijah, king of Judah, came against King Jeroboam of the northern kingdom. Abijah speaks boldly to Jeroboam before the battle begins: "*Do you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the rule over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?*" There is no reference in Scripture that God specifically ever used salt with David, but that is not what Abijah is referring to. He goes on to tell Jeroboam that Judah is following all of God's instructions of worship in the Temple, while Jeroboam set up a whole new system of his own, including idols. Abijah knew how they were supposed to worship (13:10–11), and that it included the salting of the sacrifices, known as the "salt of the covenant." God had made just such a covenant with Abijah's forefather, David, when He promised David an everlasting kingdom (2 Sam.7:16). To Abijah, the "salt of the covenant" was a symbol of something that lasts forever.

you
are
the
salt
of
the
earth

New Testament References to Salt

All this material thus far should lay a good foundation for understanding any references to salt in the New Testament. Our study of the Bible should always start with the Old Testament. I have heard many a Bible teacher say,

“...but if the salt
has become
tasteless, how
will it be made
salty again?
It is good for
nothing any
more....”

MATTHEW 5:13

“The best way to interpret a Bible passage is with the Bible itself.” The Old Testament is the best commentary for the New.

There are only six verses in the New Testament that mention salt. Four of them are in the Gospels and three of those four are accounts of the same instance. We'll look at two of the six. Have your mind open to view the interpretation of them in a different way than you have in the past. It's not that what you may have learned is wrong, but that there could be another aspect to its meaning in light of what we've learned from the Old Testament passages.

Probably the passage about salt that comes to mind immediately is in Matthew 5:13, when Yeshua said, *“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing any more, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.”* Lessons usually drawn from this passage center around the fact that salt purifies, preserves,

and flavors, paralleling these properties to how Christians should be a positive influence in a corrupt world. Let's expand on that teaching a bit.

First, Yeshua was talking to Jews. As soon as He said salt, what would they have thought of? Probably the salt of the covenant. At that time, they were still worshipping in the Temple and offering sacrifices that had to be salted. If this is what Yeshua was referring to, what would He be saying to them? Their calling as a covenant people was to be a witness to the nations of the one true God. To do that, they had to live a *Torah*-lifestyle—that which was laid out for them at Sinai or what we know today as God's instructions on how to live found in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. That lifestyle made them different from all the nations around them. If they did not display their uniqueness, they would lose their witness to the nations. This is how the Orthodox Jews live today. It is easy to pick them out because even their dress is markedly different. The fact that as a nation, they still observe *Shabbat* on Saturday also sets them apart from other nations.

What did Yeshua mean about salt becoming tasteless and being thrown out? How can salt become unsalty? It can't. However, in Yeshua's day, there was no refining process for salt. Because you couldn't tell the difference between salt and sand, the salt one used was often a mix of salt and sand. If the mixture had more sand than salt, it had no flavor and was useless.

In the Matthew discourse, chapters 5–7, we do not know if everything written was actually said in the order it was recorded. But, if so, then we can see a possible connection between His reference to salt and what He said previously, that they should consider themselves blessed if they were persecuted. He reminds them that though the world may persecute them, they are the salt of the earth, very precious to God. But, if they mix with the world and lose their uniqueness, they will be as salt without any flavor. They will lose their witness to the world.

I have an interesting salt story of my own that illustrates this. Several years ago, when a group of us Bridges For Peace volunteers were returning to Jerusalem from Eilat, the far southern tip of Israel, and coming up by the Dead Sea, our driver parked on the side of the road opposite the Dead Sea. He walked us over to the “mountain” cliff and to our amazement, pointed out that this cliff of earth was not earth at all, put salt! It was so covered by dirt that you could not tell it was a mountain of salt! After walking through a narrow opening, we entered a large cave with walls that went straight up on all sides. The “ceiling” was open to the sky. The light against the rough ridged walls of white crystallized salt, which weren't exposed to the outside dirt, made the cave look like a natural cathedral. This is a great picture of how the world's influence can cover up the beauty and power of influence that is ours.

Paul tells us that Gentile Christians have been grafted into the “rich root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17). We are part of God's covenant people, so the message Yeshua gave these first-century

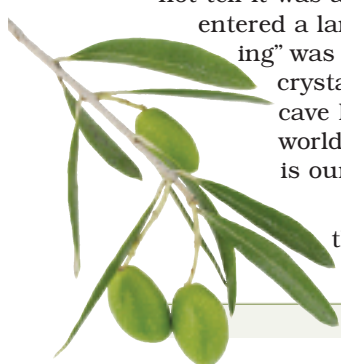
salt and sand



salt cave near
the Dead Sea



www.israelimages.com/Richard Nowitz





WOULDN'T IT
BE NICE TO
THINK OF GOD'S
ETERNAL
COVENANT
WITH US
every time
we pick up
a salt shaker?

Jews is the same for us, the Christian Church. We are not to be “conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2) or we lose our effectiveness. One of the sad commentaries about Israel today is they want to be like the other nations and are increasingly doing so. This passage is a warning to us to stay untainted by the world, so we can show the world the way to the one true God.

We'll close this teaching with Mark 9:49–50: “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Just as in the Matthew 5 passage, these verses may be a collection of Yeshua's sayings and may not have actually been taught in the order in which they were recorded. But, they could have been. Previous to these verses, Yeshua was talking about hell and that its “fire is not quenched.” Even those who are not destined to hell will be “salted with fire.” Again, what did the Jews know was “salted”? Sacrifices. If a sacrifice was not salted, it was not acceptable. Is Yeshua saying that for us to be acceptable “living” sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), we have to go through the refiner's fire, so all the hay and stubble—the “unsavory” or the “unsalty,” that which is useless to His kingdom—will be burned up (1 Cor. 3:11–15)? Could He be referring to the refining process He has to put us all through (as in Isa. 48:10)?

I like the way author J. H. Kurtz sees it. He explains that when salt was added to the offering, the sacrifice was “stamped” with a “divine power proceeding from the covenant of God with Israel.” When God salts us, even with fire, He is putting His stamp of approval on us. He is connecting us to the salt of the covenant He made with Israel...and the engrafted ones are included!

To “have salt in yourselves” reminds us of all the properties of salt, the foremost in this case probably being purity. Commentator William Barclay notes: “The ancients declared that there was nothing in the world purer than salt because it came from the two purest things, the sun and the sea. The very glistening whiteness of salt was a picture of purity.” This fits with the refining process. When we go through the fire, we come out purified. Paul tells us that this is Yeshua's goal for His Church: “That He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:26–27).

This concludes our study. I don't think I'll ever look at salt again in the same way, not just at the *Shabbat* table, but anytime I use salt. It should remind me of who I am and who God is. Wouldn't it be nice to think of God's eternal covenant with us—His faithfulness to keep His promises—every time we pick up a salt shaker?

By Charleeda Sprinkle

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All Scriptures are taken from the NASB.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and laypeople have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding “yes”! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3).

